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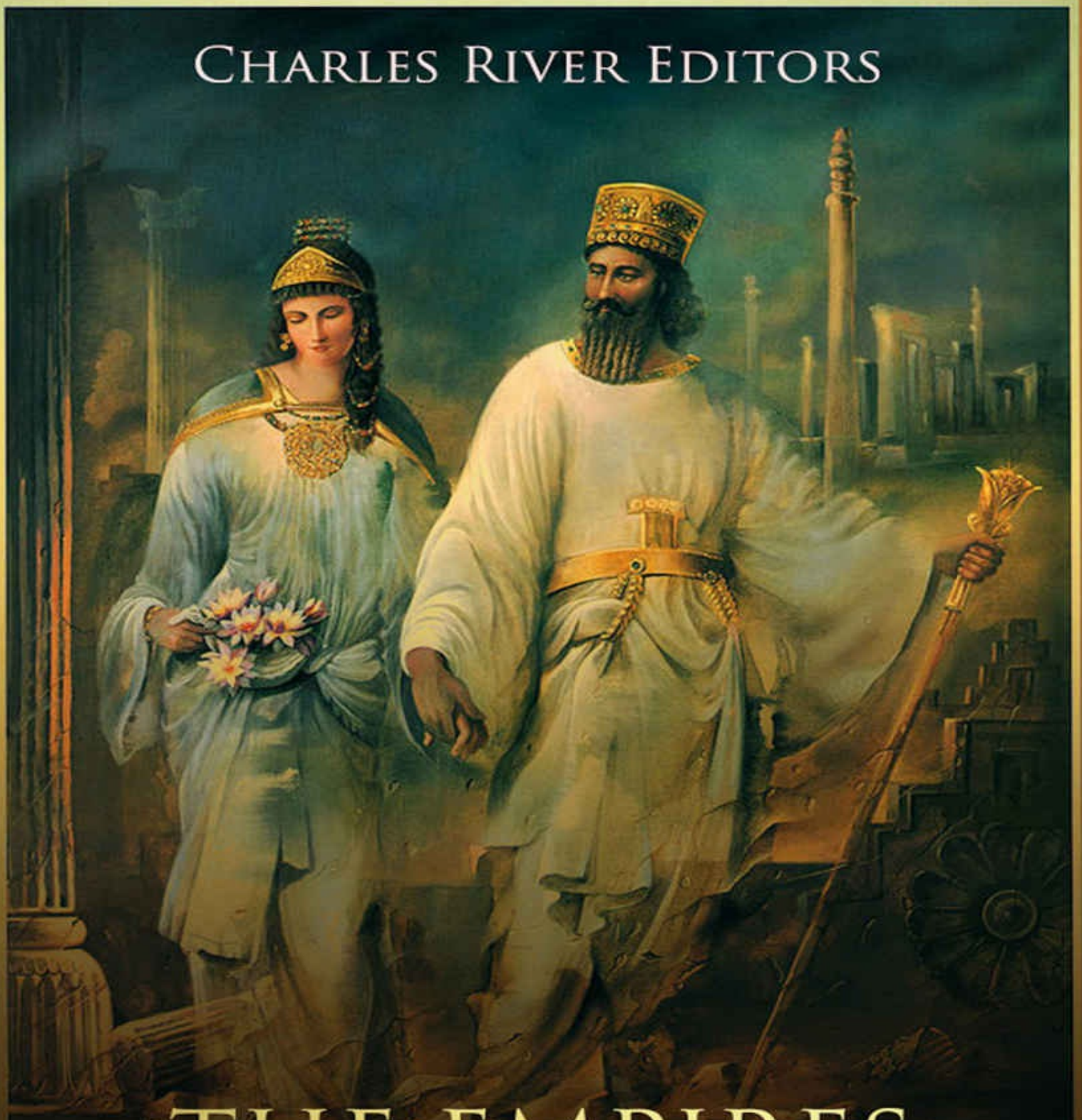
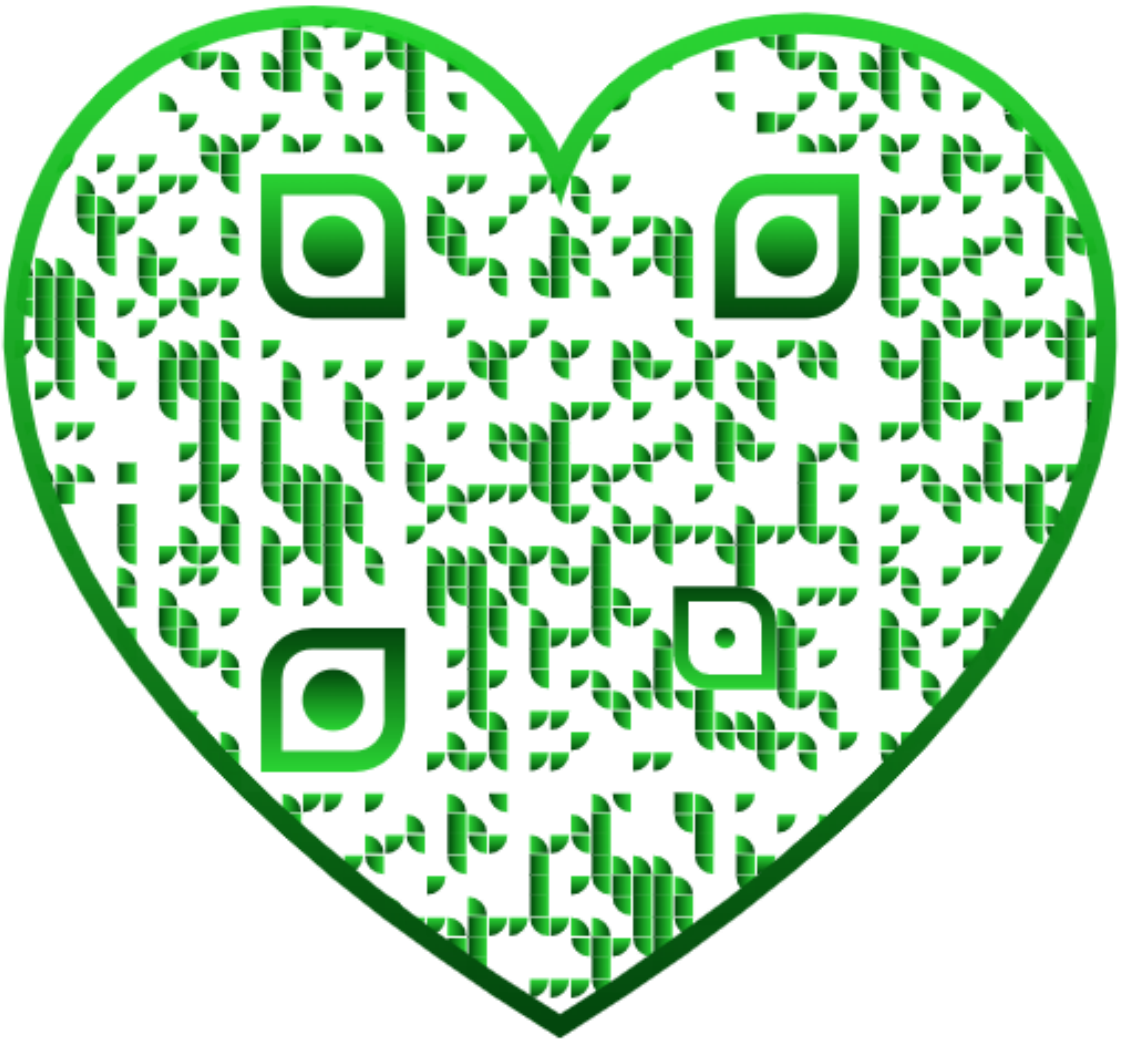


THE EMPIRES of ANCIENT PERSIA

The History and Legacy of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids in Antiquity



The Empires of Ancient Persia: The History and Legacy of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids in Antiquity

By Charles River Editors

Albor Zagros' picture of the ruins of the Gate of All Nations in Persepolis

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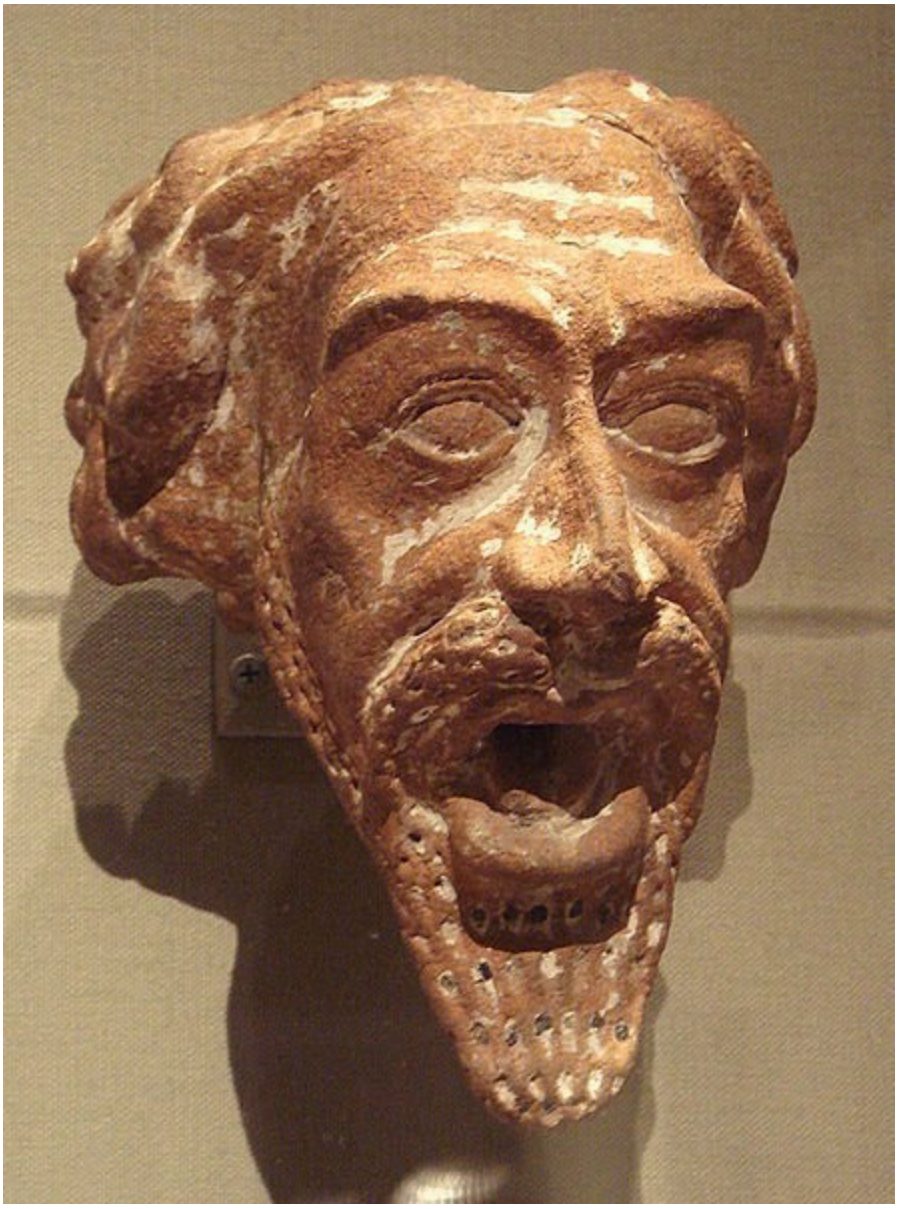
Introduction



An ancient Parthian waterspout

The Empires of Ancient Persia

"By the favor of Ahuramazda these are the countries which I got into my possession along with this Persian people, which felt fear of me and bore me tribute : Elam, Media, Babylonia, Arabia, Assyria, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia, Lydia, the Greeks who are of the mainland and those who are by

the sea, and countries which are across the sea, Sagartia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, Hinduš, Gandara, Sacae, Maka." – An inscription on a terrace wall in Persepolis, circa 521 CE

"The Parthians in whose hands the empire of the east now is, having divided the world, as it were, with the Romans, were originally exiles from Scythia. This is apparent from their very name; for in the Scythian language exiles are called Parthi. During the time of the Assyrians and Medes, they were the most obscure of all the people of the east. Subsequently, too, when the empire of the east was transferred from the Medes to the Persians, they were but as a herd without a name, and fell under the power of the stronger. At last they became subject to the Macedonians, when they conquered the east; so that it must seem wonderful to every one, that they should have reached such a height of good fortune as to rule over those nations under whose sway they had been merely slaves. Being assailed by the Romans, also, in three wars, under the conduct of the greatest generals, and at the most flourishing period of the republic, they alone, of all nations, were not only a match for them, but came off victorious; though it may have been a greater glory to them, indeed, to have been able to rise amidst the Assyrian, Median, and Persian empires, so celebrated of o]d, and the most powerful dominion of Bactria, peopled with a thousand cities, than to have been victorious in war against a people that came from a distance; especially when they were continually harassed by severe wars with the Scythians and other neighboring nations, and pressed with various other formidable contests." – An ancient Roman account of the Parthians

Lying in the middle of a plain in modern day Iran is a forgotten ancient city: Persepolis. Built two and a half thousand years ago, it was known in its day as the richest city under the sun. Persepolis was the capital of Achaemenid Persian Empire, the largest empire the world had ever seen, but after its destruction, it was largely forgotten for nearly 2,000 years, and the lives and achievements of those who built it were almost entirely erased from history. Alexander the Great's troops razed the city to the ground in a drunken riot to celebrate the conquest of the capital, after which time and sand buried it for centuries.

It was not until the excavations of the 1930s that many of the relics, reliefs,

and clay tablets that offer so much information about Persian life could be studied for the first time. Through archaeological remains, ancient texts, and work by a new generation of historians, a picture can today be built of this remarkable civilization and their capital city. Although the city had been destroyed, the legacy of the Persians survived, even as they mostly remain an enigma to the West and are not nearly as well understood as the Greeks, Romans, or Egyptians. In a sense, the Achaemenid Persian Empire holds some of the most enduring mysteries of ancient civilization.

The Parthian people created an empire that lasted almost 500 years, from the mid-3rd century BCE until 224 CE, and it stretched from the Euphrates River in the west to Central Asia and the borders of Bactria in the east (Brosius 2010, 83). In fact, the expansive empire challenged the Romans on numerous occasions for supremacy in the Near East, created the first sustainable link between the peoples of Europe and East Asia, and followed a religion that many consider to be the oldest form of monotheism in the world; but despite these accomplishments the Parthians are often overlooked in favor of the Achaemenid and Sassanid Persians who came before and after them respectively, not to mention the Romans themselves. Although the Parthians may not get top billing in most popular histories of the period, they left an indelible mark on the world that cannot be overstated.

Perhaps part of the reason why the Parthians have been overshadowed by other peoples is due to the nature of the primary sources used to reconstruct their history. Although the Parthians were literate, they wrote no histories of their dynasty and most of the extant ancient historical sources are somewhat biased since they were written by Roman and Greek historians. The Greek and Roman historians provide excellent accounts of some of the battles between the Romans and Parthians, but they are for the most part limited to warfare and view the situations almost totally from the Roman perspective. The Parthians built a number of monuments, temples, and tombs so modern archaeological excavations help scholars reconstruct some aspects of their city and court life, but again the evidence is limited and only of limited use alone. Thus, to construct an accurate chronology of the Parthian dynasty, modern scholars are forced to combine the Roman and Greek historians with the available numismatic evidence from the Parthian period since the Parthians made different coins for the reigns of most of their kings (Brosius

2010, 80). All that said, when historians combine all of the available primary sources concerning the Parthians, not only can an accurate chronology of their dynasty be compiled, but various aspects of their culture, such as economics and religion, are also made clear.

During the first half of the 1st millennium CE, an empire arose in Persia that extended its power and influence to Mesopotamia in the east, Arabia in the south, the Caucasus Mountains in the north, and as far east as India. This empire, known alternatively as the Sasanian Empire or Sassanid Empire, was the last of three great dynasties in Persia—the Achaemenid and the Parthian being the first two dynasties—before the rise of Islam. In fact, many scholars consider the Sasanian Empire to be the last great empire of the ancient Near East because once it had been obliterated, Islam became the standard religion of the region, ushering in the Middle Ages.

The Sasanian Empire was important for a number of reasons. Besides being the last of three great Persian dynasties, they carried on many Persian cultural traditions relating to religion and kingship. The Sasanians fostered and promoted the native religion of Zoroastrianism to the point of persecuting other religions from time to time. It was during the Sasanian period that the numerous Zoroastrian hymns, prayers, and rituals were collected under one book, known as the *Avesta*.

Thanks to the Sasanians' efforts with regard to religion, modern scholars know much more about Zoroastrianism than they would have if the religion continued to disseminate orally. Their efforts also protected Zoroastrian knowledge in later years after the dynasty was long gone and Islam became ascendant in Persia.

The Sasanians, like the Achaemenids and Parthians, also carried forth the Persian conflicts with the Hellenic world. Although the Achaemenids fought the Macedonian Greeks and the Parthians challenged the imperial Romans for control of Mesopotamia, the Sasanians faced Rome in its later stages of collapse and subsequently fought the revitalized Byzantine Empire. An examination of Sasanian chronology and culture reveals that it was a much more important dynasty and empire than most may think.

The Empires of Ancient Persia: The History and Legacy of the

Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids in Antiquity looks at the three major empires, their importance, and their collapse. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about the empires like never before.

The Empires of Ancient Persia: The History and Legacy of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids in Antiquity
About Charles River Editors
Introduction
- The Foundation of the Persian Empire
- Persepolis and Persian Culture
- The First Persian War
- The Second Persian War
- Alexander the Great
- The Geographic and Ethnic Origins of the Parthians
- The Parthian Government and Imperial Administration
- The Parthian Economy and Trade
- War with Rome
- Parthian Warfare and Military
- Parthian Religion
- The Decline of the Parthian Empire
- Early Sasanian History
- Sassanian Religion
- Other Aspects of Sasanian Culture
- Later Sasanian History
- Online Resources
- Bibliography

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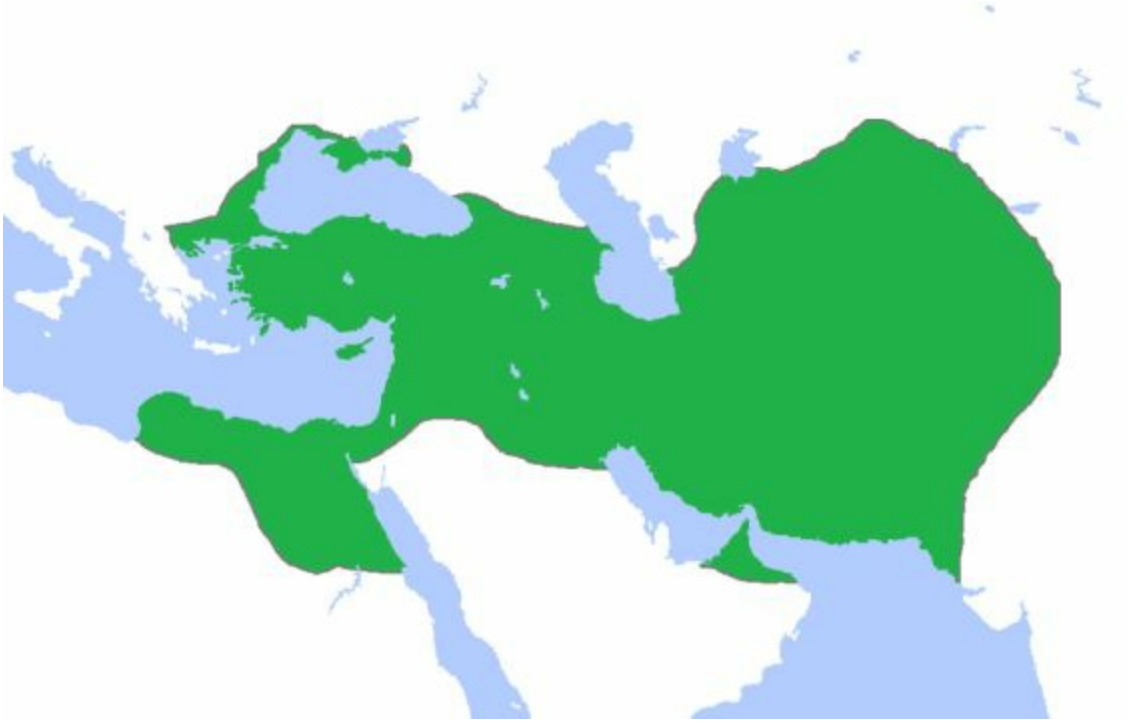
The Foundation of the Persian Empire

The Persians had humble beginnings among the Indo-European nomadic tribes that lived in the plains of central Eurasia. They originally coexisted alongside a number of prominent Indo-European tribes, including the Medes, Khwarezmians, Sogdians, Bactrians, and Heretians.[1] However, around 550 BCE, Cyrus, a tribal leader, set off on a campaign of conquests. With his charisma, and with what the Greeks called the “fear he inspired and the terror he struck in all men,” Cyrus took control of more and more territory, eventually overthrowing their primary rival, the Medes.[2]

An engraving depicting Cyrus the Great

Cyrus the Great, as he became known, subsequently founded the Persian Empire and reigned as the first king of the Achaemenid Dynasty from approximately 550-530 BCE. In just 30 years he laid the foundations of an empire whose borders would stretch from India in the east, to Greece on the Mediterranean, down to Egypt and Ethiopia, and north to what is now Russia. More than 30 different peoples were brought together under the rule of the man that called himself the “King of the World.”



A map depicting the enormous extent of the Achaemenid Empire

Cyrus established his palace at the ancient city of Pasargadae. This site represented the birth of the Achaemenid rule, demonstrated Persian culture at its most sophisticated and refined, and influenced both the artistic and architectural layout and lifestyle of other urban centers in Persia. The city was founded in 550 BCE and served as the empire’s first capital, but it was later abandoned by the Persian kings in favor of Susa and Persepolis. Irrigation channels were dug into the earth, leading towards the city’s most stunning feature: its royal gardens.[3] The entire area in front of Cyrus’s residential palace was cultivated as a walled garden called the *pairidaēza* – a word that was later adopted by the Ancient Greek and Latin languages, and which gives English the modern word “paradise.”

Mohammad Reza Domiri Ganji's picture of the Tomb of Cyrus in Pasargadae

Cyrus was famous throughout the ancient world for his love of gardens, to the extent that the ancient Greek writer Xenophon noted that "in all the districts that he [Cyrus] resides in, he takes great care that there are paradises full of all the beautiful things that the soil will produce."[4] No archaeologist has ever found evidence of the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon, so those of Cyrus's palace represent the earliest evidence of a formal garden

found anywhere in the world. Gardens similar to this one were widely found across the empire during successive dynasties. These gardens were seen as representations of the perfection of life, where the flowing water would have been refreshing and cool in the hot climate.[5]

Herodotus, one of the earliest Greek historians, also wrote that “the Persians adopt foreign customs more readily than any other people.”[6] This sentence, written perhaps with a touch of contempt, actually reveals one of the most positive and impressive aspects of the Persian Empire. In the time of Cyrus, the economy in Asia was expanding and the people wanted stability. There was a widespread desire for ecumenism, meaning people wanted to be part of a unified world. The first to appreciate the value of this concept and to put it into practice was Cyrus. Found in Pasargadae was a sculpture of a winged genie that appears in the form of a typical Assyrian figure, dressed as an Elamite and wearing a showy Egyptian headdress.[7] The evidence suggests that the concept of a unified world, or perhaps a desire to belong to one, had originated in Persia. It also suggests that the Persians found pleasure in trying out the different lifestyles of the empire’s many peoples.[8]

The Persian Empire extended into Europe under the rule of Cyrus’s successors, and many other great cities were founded in modern Iran under their rule. Cambyses II added Egypt to the empire, and he was succeeded by his cousin, Darius the Great, who ruled for 36 years between 550 and 486 BCE. Under his rule the empire reached its greatest extent, stretching from the Indus Valley and Central Asia on the east to Libya and the Danube River on the west.

A relief in Persepolis that depicts Darius

Darius spent the earliest years of his rule stymieing revolts across the Persian territory, and he appointed satraps (local governors) to oversee the maintenance of order and collection of taxes in the diverse regions of the empire. Realizing that many of their subject peoples were just as advanced as the Persians, these satraps served as representatives of the empire but otherwise allowed local customs and laws to continue existing, as long as they swore obedience to the Persian king and paid their taxes. Darius also ordered the construction of an extensive network of roads that expedited communication and trade across his realm.

10 years after Pasargadae was founded by Cyrus, Darius I initiated a new era marked by the transfer of the Achaemenid capital to Persepolis. Historical records indicate that under Darius I the proto-Elamite city of Susa grew in splendor, becoming an imperial capital along with Persepolis. At Susa, a great number of building foundations and the remains of massive columns attest to the presence of one of the largest palatial cities of Persia, equal in grandeur to Persepolis.[9]

It was also during this time that the importance of other parts of Mesopotamia gradually declined, with the Persian lands in modern Iran serving as the new center of cultural and political hegemony in central Asia. Nonetheless, even as the Persians were building great cities and gardens, they were still essentially a nomadic people. Like many groups in modern-day Iran, Persian communities would spend the winter months tending to their herds on the plains, and spend the hot summer months in the cool of the mountains.[10] For the Greeks, the Persians' nomadic lifestyle was a cause for mockery – escaping from the summer heat was taken as evidence of Persian unmanliness.[11] What the Greeks never understood, though, was that traveling was a key part of the Persian way of life. Their nomadic traditions always remained even after the construction of their cities – they were as at home in a tent as they were in the monumental structures of urban centers. Even around great settlements like Persepolis, there would have been a city of tents for those that came and went from the hinterland. Within these tents, one can imagine that ancient Persian life would not be too dissimilar to the kinds of images that can be seen today: cooking, the rearing of animals, the collecting of foodstuffs, and the weaving of clothing and carpets.

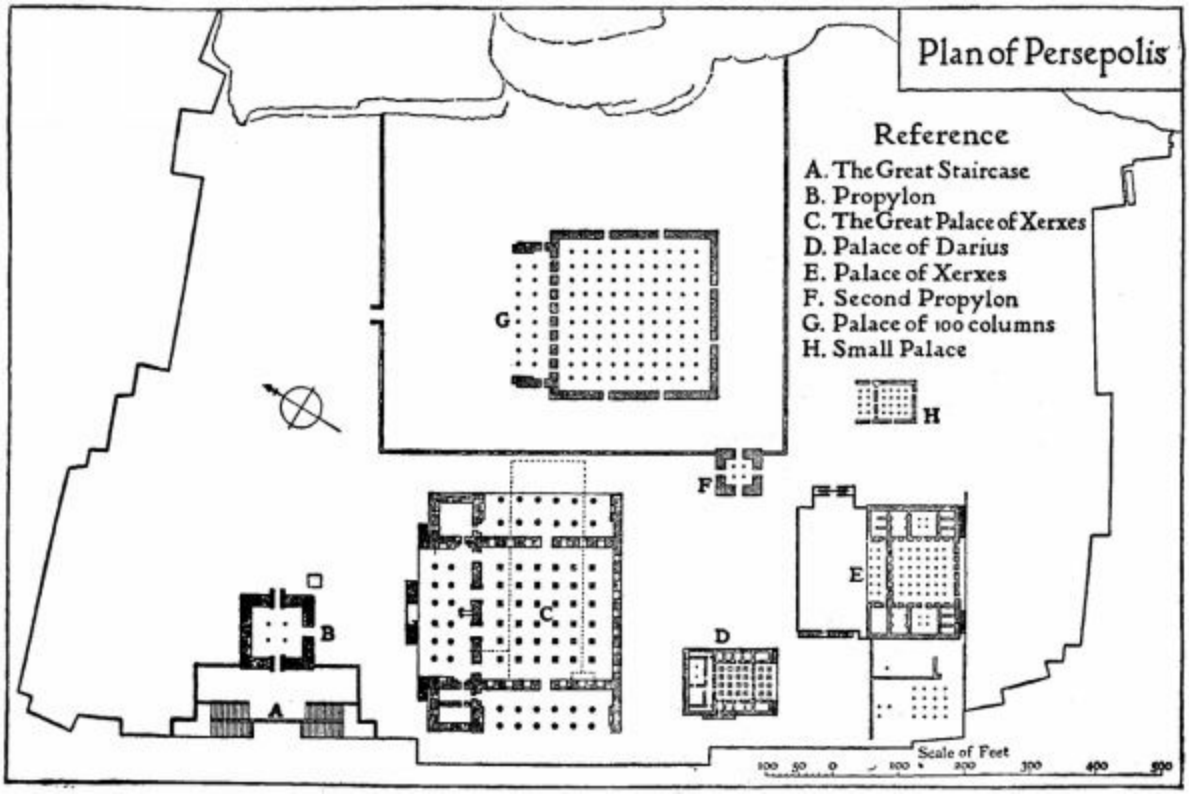
Hansueli Krapf's picture of the ruins of Darius's palace

Elnaz Sabar's picture of the ruins of Tachara, Darius's palace

Moreover, the Persian kings did not stay in a single place throughout the entire year. Persepolis was covered in snow for most of the winter, and thus impractical for many of the governmental functions. With such a vast empire to direct, the government could not simply shut down during this time of the

year. Instead, they transferred operations to Susa – the bona fide second imperial capital in its own right.[12] They migrated seasonally, residing in Susa during the colder months and in Persepolis during the summer. These two cities were not only the political, economic, and administrative centers in the heartland of the empire but also regarded as sacred capitals. Pasargadae was used during coronation ceremonies, and Persepolis also had a key ceremonial role, having been founded as a site to hold the great annual feast of Nowruz, the Persian New Year's celebration.[13] People streamed into the city for the festival of Nowruz from neighboring areas and put up their tents in the suburbs of the capital as activities took place both outside and inside the palace grounds. The king initiated the Nowruz feast when his subjects bore him upon his throne from one capital to the other. Because of this, Persians called Persepolis Takht-i Jamshēd, which translated to "the Throne of Jamshid" (in reference to the popular mythological figure Jamshid).[14]

Persepolis and Persian Culture



A blueprint layout of Persepolis

Positioned in the heart of the continent-sized Persian Empire was

Persepolis, the greatest of all Persian cities and the key to understanding their empire's greatest achievements. "Persepolis" is the Greek designation for the acropolis of the city that was once originally called Pérsēs ("The Persians), but today it is generally applied to both the city and its acropolis. The name is attested in Achaemenid inscriptions, but after the fall of the Persian Empire and the destruction of the city, the population was no longer able to read the royal documents and inscriptions. The name of the city was gradually forgotten, and later the Sassanids called it *Sad Stun* ("The One Hundred Columned").

Columns at Persepolis

Persepolis is located in the Fars Province of modern-day Iran, approximately 70 miles northeast of modern-day Shiraz. Ancient Persia was composed of a broad range of ecozones, including plateaus, rainforests, deserts, plains, and mountain ranges – each containing a diversity of flora and fauna, and a climate ranging from arid to sub-tropical. The characteristics of the landscape in and around Persepolis were major factors in the site's growth and success. In particular, the city's success depended strictly upon its relationship with the ecology, climate, and resources of the Marvdasht Plain, a remote and barren land surrounded by sharp cliffs and fertile foothills of the Zagros Mountains, and part of the Kur River Basin.[15] This area was settled around the first millennium BCE. The climate of the region affected Persepolis dramatically. During the rainy season of the Iranian winter the surrounding landscape became muddy and impassible. Therefore, most activity in the city took place during the warmer spring and summer seasons.

Archaeologists have been able to attribute most of the structures and phases of construction in Persepolis to the reign of one emperor. Persepolis was founded shortly before 500 BCE by Darius the Great, the fourth king of the Achaemenid Dynasty. The first period of construction took place between 518 and 490 BCE. During this time, the monumental terrace was constructed along with the Apadana audience hall and Treasury building, with the eastern stairs serving as the access point.[16] King after king added to Darius's creation. The second period of construction began from around 490 BCE as Darius initiated the construction of the Taçara, "winter palace" and the Gate of All Nations with its stairway, and expanded the Apadana. Many of these structures were completed during the third period of construction between 480 and 470 BCE, under the rule of his son, Xerxes I. Xerxes I, the greatest foe of the Greeks, succeeded Darius in 486 and ruled until 465 BCE.

Ruins of the Apadana in Persepolis

Arya Mahasattva's picture of a relief on the Apadana that depicts an Armenian bearing tribute to the Persians

A relief depicting Xerxes

Jona Lendering's picture of a relief of Xerxes located at Persepolis

The largest part of Persepolis – a sort of second city – was built by the succeeding emperors of Xerxes down to Darius III. Under Xerxes's rule the Hadiš, Queen's Quarters, Tripylon, and Southern Buildings were constructed. After Xerxes, Persepolis continued to expand considerably, and friezes and bas-reliefs of this period depict it as a time of great celebration and expansion of the empire. This gives a sense of how strong and solid the empire was – quite the opposite of the barbarian images that the ancient Greeks handed down to Western civilization. Under the rule of Artaxerxes I, the Hall of One Hundred Columns was constructed, along with his palace and the garrison quarters.[17] The final phase of construction took place from the turn of the century to Alexander's invasion in 334 BCE.[18] During this time the royal tombs of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III were excavated, the Palace of Artaxerxes III was constructed along with the Hall of Thirty Two Columns, and a new road and gate were started.

Masoud Khalife's picture of the ruins of Artaxerxes I's palace

In approximately 518 BCE, Darius selected a huge rock on the northwestern side of a hill called Kouh-e Rahmat ("Mountain of Mercy") for the construction of an immense terrace, upon which a fort, palaces, audience halls, and a treasury would later be built.[19] Large sections of the original rock were cut away, with the stone carved into immense stone blocks, and these blocks were used together with rough boulders, smaller stones, and mud to construct the terrace. It took almost a century for this giant platform to be completed, but when it did, it covered an area of more than 125,000 square

meters.

Due to its massive size, the construction of the palatial complex took place in a series of stages. The finished terrace was between 45-55 feet high, with the southern part lower than the rest. This area was where the original access point was located.[20] Water channels were dug into the bedrock and the hillside, with an outlet dug in the form of a long and deep moat located behind the eastern wall. Originally, there was a fortification wall that went around its entire circumference, including the ridge and crest of the adjacent Kouh-e Rahmat.[21]

The terrace was later accessed by a series of monumental double-staircases on the northwestern side of the acropolis platform. The construction of the staircases was ordered by Xerxes. Each flight had 111 steps and each step was about 20 feet wide and 38 centimeters deep, but with a very shallow rise of just 10 centimeters. The steps were deliberately given broad width and short height so that the large number of military and civil officers, and representatives of the subject nations who came to the city, could climb with ease and in groups, as seen in the frieze of the Tripylon staircase.[22]

A. Davey’s picture of the double staircase

Located east of these stairs was the Gate of All Nations, the monumental entrance portal that provided access to the ceremonial core of the city. Two massive guardian bulls supported the pillars of the west doorway. These were images of kingship and royal strength known as *lamassu* that had been adopted from the Babylonian civilization and became widely used throughout the Persian homeland.[23] They announced to visitors that they were entering the heart of royal Persian power. The gate was covered in a cedar wood roof, and its doors were adorned with gold fittings.[24] Walking through the enormous structure, visitors were asked to stand and wait in a four columned hall, sitting on benches of black marble that abutted the walls. These walls were covered in glazed tiles that were decorated with patterns of lotus flowers, palm trees, and stars. Here, the foreign delegates would be arranged in groups depending on the distance they had traveled to reach Persepolis before being allowed to access the imperial platform.[25] A master of ceremonies would stand on a platform abutting one of the walls, observing the hall and within view of the king's palace, where a representative would give him a signal to send forth the delegates.[26] They would then proceed through the southern doorway. Persian dignitaries, in contrast to those from vassal states outside of the Persian heartland, would pass through the eastern doorway, the pillars of which were supported by additional human-headed *lamassu* bulls.[27]

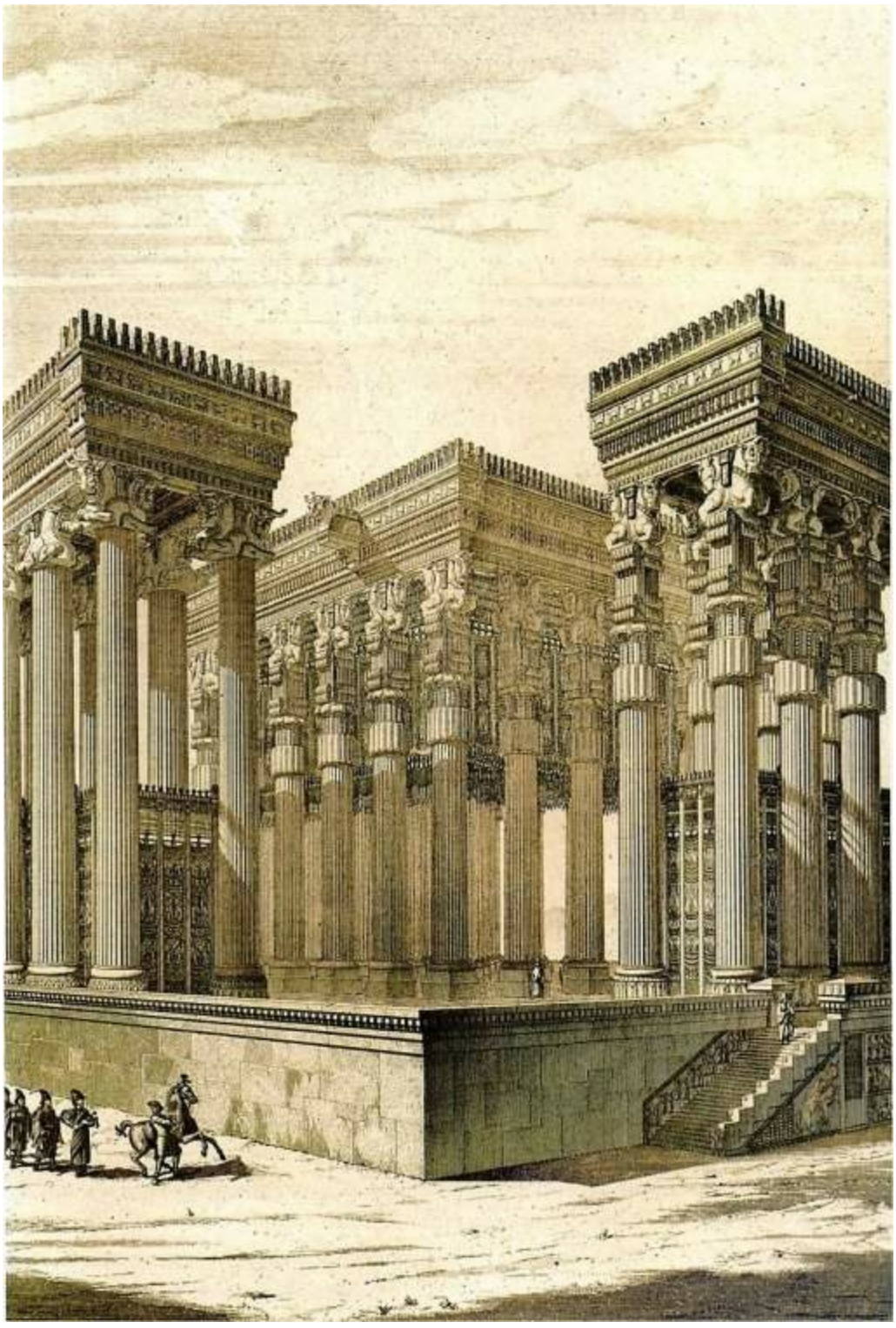
A relief with a lotus flower

A. Davey's picture of a relief depicting lotus flowers

Fulvio Spada's picture of a lamassu at the Gate of All Nations

At the heart of Persepolis was the Apadana, an audience hall where the Persian king received his subjects – and where the mysteries of the city truly begin. The Apadana took 30 years to complete and covered an area of 3,600 square meters – almost as large as a modern-day football field. It is believed that the enormous hall could have accommodated up to 10,000 people. Its walls were nearly six meters thick.[28] Today, only 14 of the original columns still stand, but in its original state, 72 columns, each over 80 feet high, held

up another massive cedar wood ceiling. Each column was supported by a square base with a fluted shaft and a capital in the form of a double-headed bull (unusually the capitals of the eastern portico had a double-headed lion instead).[29] The floor would likely have been covered in costly carpets and rugs, and the walls would have been adorned with glazed tiles, decorated with variegated floral motifs, rows of cedar and palm trees, files of soldiers, and even cuneiform inscriptions.[30]



An imagined reconstruction of the Apadana

Ruins of the Apadana

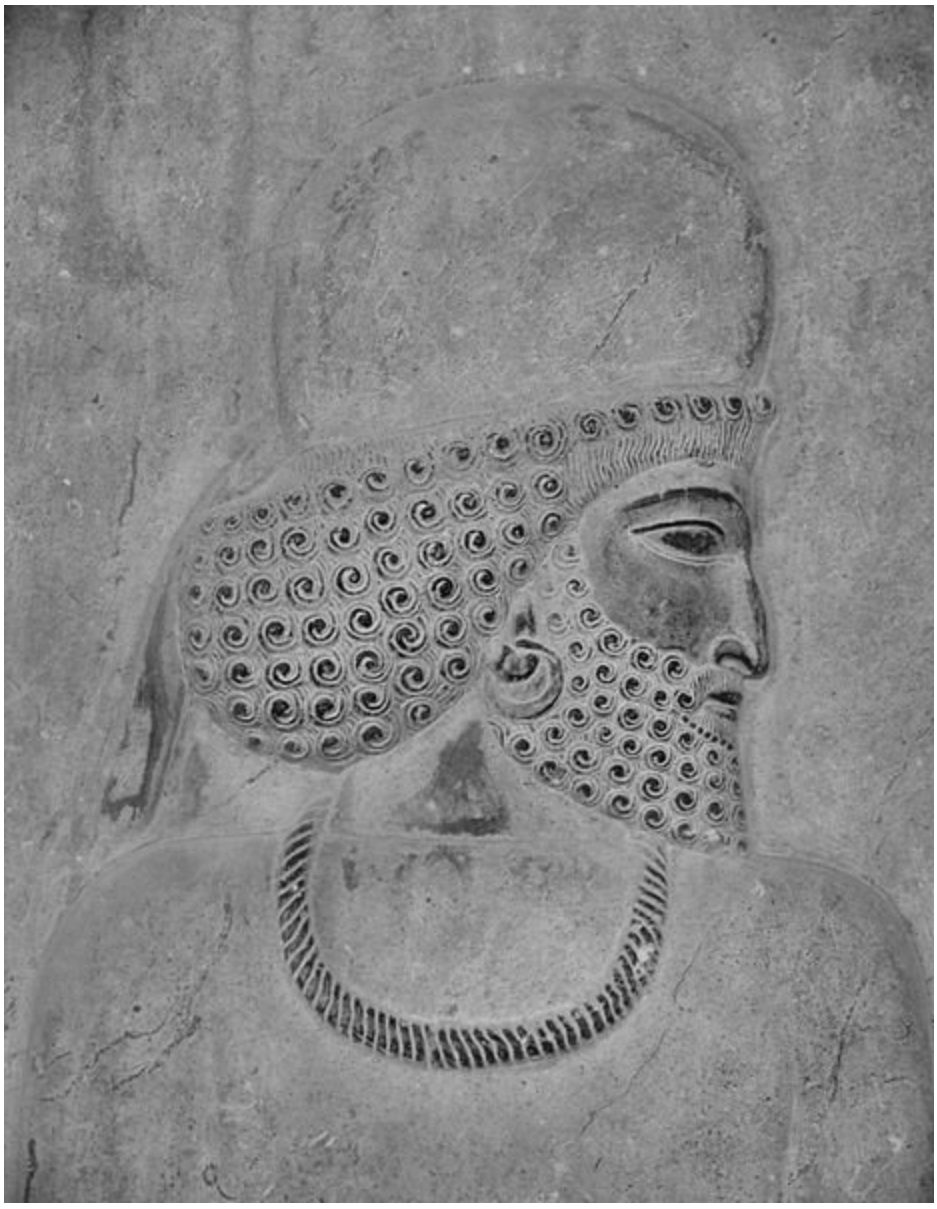
The construction of this extraordinary palace was a remarkable achievement, so Darius the Great ordered a trilingual inscription in the Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite languages to be prepared. It listed his name and the extent of his realm, and was copied onto four pairs of gold and silver tablets. Each pair of tablets were placed within a stone box and deposited inside the foundation wall at each of the four corners of the hall.[31] King Xerxes made some modifications to the Apadana, as attested by an inscription on glazed bricks discovered there that state, “The great king Xerxes says: By the grace of Ahuramazda, much that had been ordered by King Darius, my father, was well. It was also by the grace of Ahuramazda that I completed these works and made it excellent.”[32] However, it is unknown precisely what these later works were.

The Apadana was where the Persian kings received tribute from all of the peoples of their empire, and where they could portray themselves as conquerors of the world. After climbing the staircases and through the deep

portico, the foreign dignitaries would have been led through a massive set of doorways, each 60 feet high and covered with sheets of decorative gold patterns, lions, and bulls. Unfortunately, nothing remains today apart from the massive doorsills. Visitors would have had to go through a specific series of ceremonial actions when they entered the great hall, as indicated by the bas-reliefs carved throughout the acropolis. They would have fallen to their knees in front of the king, and then immediately prostrated themselves on the ground, before giving the gifts or tribute and slowly backing out of the great throne room.[33]

The most beautiful and important surviving part of the Apadana is the eastern portico frieze, which is decorated with exquisite sculptured bas-reliefs. This frieze was likely created in the final years of the 6th century BCE and is believed to have been the work of *Yaunâ* sculptors from Greece.[34] The inner façade of the Apadana eastern portico frieze that faces the courtyard, is decorated with lines of soldiers, dignitaries, and courtiers adorning one wing, and twenty-three gift-bearing delegations on another. The northern part of the frieze depicts a troupe of dignitaries from within the Persian homeland marching alongside horsemen and charioteers. At the center are eight armed men and a winged sun.

On the southern area of the frieze is depicted a procession of dignitaries from all over the Persian Empire traveling to Persepolis to give gifts and pay tribute to the great Persian king. 23 nations have been identified in this stairway frieze, and among those represented are Thracians from Southeast Europe, Syrians and Cappadocians from the Levant and Anatolia, Aryans, Bactrians, and Sogdians from the East, Arabs from the South, Babylonians from ancient Mesopotamia, and Libyans from Africa.[35] The nations were identified by their styles of dress or facial features; the Medes were those with round caps, the Persians had straight caps, and the Elamites had their distinctive robes.[36] They are shown bringing objects and commodities from different parts of the empire, such as fine horses, shaggy mountain goats, camels, ivory tusks, carts gold, and jewelry.



Albor Zagros' picture of a depiction of a Mede

Phillip Malwald's picture of Armenians bringing wine to the king

Bon Tenbal's picture of Medes and Persians

Some of the figures possess characteristics that mark them as figures of great importance. For example, one Elamite is wearing a diadem in his curly hair and brings with him lions to offer to the Persian leader, all of which are signs of royalty.[37] Some of the objects that are shown on the friezes have been discovered by archaeologists, such as a tall golden vessel with handles in the shape of griffins. Most of these dignitaries are shown carrying a lotus-like flower, and some hold round objects, both of which are still associated with the Nowruz festival.[38] This displayed both the wealth and power of the Persian Empire.

The frieze was also covered in symbolic imagery. Floral rosettes with 12 petals are shown, likely symbolizing the 12 months of the year, as well as cypress trees and an evergreen plant that was considered auspicious and paradoxical by the Persians.[39] These have been interpreted as symbols of perpetual happiness and prosperity. A lion attacking a bull is shown beneath the sculpted cypress trees, with the lion's head depicted frontally – a perspective that is very unusual compared to the side-on profiles of the figures shown elsewhere across the city. The most accepted interpretation of this scene is its astronomical association. The lion Leo was one of the signs of the Persian zodiac and was associated with the sun.[40] The bull Taurus was also one of the star signs that had been identified by this time. These stars were closely associated with the Vernal Equinox, which in the Persian calendar marked the start of the Nowruz festival.[41] It may also have signified "eternity," the symbolism of which would not have been lost among those attending ceremonies at the site that were designed to strengthen the ties between the diverse parts of the empire.

This frieze indicates that Persepolis was less a military capital, and instead first and foremost a symbolic and ceremonial place. From all over the empire, subject peoples came here to give their gifts to the king. The formal presentation of tribute confirmed the loyalty of the subject nations and the power of the king. A walk to the king followed a specific route through the complex, intended to maximize the impact of the architecture. Thousands of years later, it's still possible to imagine the cacophony of noise that would have been caused by the procession as they climbed the great staircases of the

unfamiliar city before they finally reached the Gate of All Nations. Coming from the far-flung corners of the empire, few of these people would have ever seen a structure like this, ensuring that every visitor in ancient times who was allowed to climb to the royal terrace would have been in total awe.

The Royal Treasury was one of the first buildings to be constructed on the platform. Its function was interpreted from the artifacts discovered there, among which was a cache of 750 clay tablets inscribed with texts in the Elamite language.[42] These tablets preserved the record of payments to those employed in Persepolis. Needless to say, this archive is crucial because it sheds light on the administration of the work and conditions of the laborers at Persepolis, providing information on the division of work, the ethnic background of many employees, and their classification according to skills and gender.[43] Both men and women were hired as laborers at Persepolis and were paid in kind or cash according to their skills and nature of their work.[44] The tablets also record the staff of the Treasury itself. They indicate that more than 1,300 people worked there.[45]

Also found in the Treasury was a statue of Penelope, wife of the legendary Greek figure Odysseus. The statue may have been stolen from Greece during the campaigns there led by Darius I in 480 BCE, or it might have been gifted to the king by a foreign dignitary.[46]

The second-largest palace of Persepolis was a splendid building with a central hall containing 100 hundred columns, which gave the structure its name: the Hall of 100 Columns. Its construction was started by Xerxes and completed by his son, Artaxerxes I. The columns of the building were laid out in 10 rows of 10 columns each, built of a local dark-grey stone. Each had a bell-shaped base, fluted shaft, and was adorned on the top with floral designs and a gilded double-headed bull, upon whose backs rested the cedar rafters that supported the ceiling. The hall was over 200 feet long and 200 feet wide, and access was provided by four main doorways, two to the south and two to the north.[47] The doorways to the south were decorated with the figures of the king in audience, with subjects carrying his throne. Those to the north depict five rows of 10 figures, each shown from one perspective of their profile on either side of the doorway. These one hundred individuals represented the most senior officials of the empire – an analogy to the

symbolism of the hundred columns within the hall.[48]

Luis Argerich’s picture of a column with heads of bulls

It’s believed that this structure was an additional audience hall, though at an unknown point in time it was converted into storage rooms. Not everyone was allowed to approach the king. Sometimes visitors would have to be content with a glimpse of the emperor. According to bas-reliefs, when the king sat on his throne, he was enclosed in curtains and shrouded in shadow. The sparkling of his golden scepter was the signal that granted the right to

speak. Only a select few would have been allowed to approach the king and pay homage to him with a deferential kiss known as *proskynesis*.[49]

Some of the most beautiful works of Persian art have been found in the Hall of 100 Columns. Their art was depicted in a very stylized manner, from the way they rendered the curls of hair to the extraordinarily detailed animals with evocative facial expressions.[50] There is also evidence that the friezes were painted in bright colors. The costumes for all of the foreign delegates are rendered in such detail that it is clear the Persian artists were fascinated by the variety of peoples they witnessed visiting the city. Also found in the building was the miniature bust of a young prince made of lapis lazuli and eyes of precious stones, now lost. Another work of art there was a small tile ornamented with an eagle with outstretched wings – the royal ensign of the Persian Empire.[51]

After presiding over the grand procession in the Apadana, the king would withdraw to the central palace known as the Tripylon (the "Triple Gate"), a private room for the king and his councilors located in between the Apadana and Hall of 100 Columns.[52] The building is composed of a main hall supported by four massive columns, each decorated with capitals sculpted in the shape of *lamassu* bulls. The eastern doorway depicts the mirror images of a ceremonial scene showing the Persian king seated on a royal chair, with his crown prince standing behind him.[53] They are both upon a massive platform that is being carried into the hall by 28 people – an image that may allude to what happened inside the structure. The north and south doors of the Tripylon led to the king's private apartments; these were also heavily decorated, this time showing the king leaving the building.

It was here that the king would meet with his trusted aides to improve the organization of his empire. In this chamber, the council resolved to build new roads, chart new sea routes, establish a unified system of weights and measures (evidence of which has been discovered in the Treasury), and adopt a common currency using bi-metal coins of gold and silver. That said, some scholars argue that this structure was nothing more than a monumental corridor connecting the Apadana and Hall of 100 Columns.

One of the first palaces built on the Persepolis platform was the Taçara ("winter palace"), located to the southwest of the Apadana and facing south.

This was intended to serve as the private residence of Darius, but he died before construction was completed, so it was finished by his son, Xerxes.[54] The façade of the building was almost exactly modeled after Achaemenid royal tombs from Darius onwards, and its lintels carved in an Egyptian style also showed a striking resemblance to the palace of the Sasanian king Ardašir I in the city of Firuzabad.[55] Bas-reliefs were carved into the door frames and façade depicting the king entering the building carried by a retinue of servants. Other motifs show the king's warriors slaying lions, winged bulls, and other beasts.[56] The columns and ceiling of this palace were probably wooden, though no trace of them has survived. There were many royal inscriptions carved into the walls, doorways, window frames, and even on doorknobs of the palace. The floor was paved with red tiles and likely covered in beautiful carpets. One particularly splendid room within this complex was a room dimly lit by light streaming through the window spaces which then reflected off of the highly polished stonework within. The architectural work was created with such a refined polish and beauty that people called it "the Mirror Hall."[57]

Sometime after 375 BCE, Artaxerxes III added a gate and staircase on the western side of the palace.[58] Upon the doorframe, he had inscribed messages that proclaimed his royal lineage and the buildings constructed during his reign. It is believed that a garden was also cultivated during this period, as small water channels were installed close to the gate,[59] and the clay tablets found in Persepolis list the different trees and plants that were planted here.[60] They showed that the composition of the garden was deeply symbolic. There were seedlings for thousands of different types of plants – including mulberries, olives, and dates – that had been collected by the king. These were trees that he had imported from all over his empire to reflect the size and extent of his power in this garden space. This garden was another form of political statement, because by making plants grow in an otherwise barren landscape, and by creating something ordered in an otherwise chaotic environment, the Persian kings showed all who came that they were the masters of the world.[61]

Close to the Mirror Hall was the palace of Xerxes, built on the south side of the terrace. Known as the Hadiš, it measured over 7,500 square feet, making it twice as large as the palace of Darius.[62] The main hall in the palace

featured 36 columns, and surrounding it were three rooms on its eastern side, and three on its western side. On the northern side was a wide portico facing the Apadana. The decorative scheme of this building was similar to that of Darius's palace, with bas-reliefs that depicted the king being carried by servants as he entered and exited his residence. Located in between the palace of Darius and that of Xerxes is a very well preserved interconnecting stairway frieze depicting Ahura Mazda flanked on each side by sphinxes and members of the king's bodyguard. According to Classical writers, this elite core of the Persian army consisted of 10,000 foot soldiers carefully selected to protect the emperor. The number always remained at 10,000, because as soon as one died or was injured another immediately replaced him. For this reason, the corps was known as "The Immortals," or the "apple bearers."[63] Based on the depictions of these troops at the Palace of Xerxes and on glazed bricks at Susa, their uniforms were very colorful and shone with brilliant golden and floral designs.[64] The king they defended represented the unified state, and the sole ruler capable of imposing order onto the world. In some parts of the empire, he was even viewed as a divinity.

The aforementioned halls represent the most well-known structures on the acropolis, but many other buildings were constructed there. There were various residential areas and small private palaces scattered throughout the acropolis. On the lower southern side of the platform was a complex known as the Southern Buildings, which may have been used as store rooms or residential quarters for slaves and servants.[65] These were built by Xerxes between approximately 480 and 470 BCE. It is believed that they stand on top of the earliest point of access to the acropolis.

Located west of the palaces of Darius and Xerxes was a series of structures known today as the Garrison Quarters, though it is unknown precisely what their function once was. These were constructed during the reign of Artaxerxes I and feature a very well-preserved kitchen area, complete with a mud-brick oven.[66]

East of Xerxes's palace and west of the Treasury is the so-called Queen's Quarters, an L-shaped complex also constructed during the period of Xerxes' rule. Although it has been called a "harem," these institutions did not exist in Persia during the Achaemenid period of rule; the title was given by later

European explorers drawing upon fanciful stories of the Persian king's 360 wives as described by the Greeks.[67]

Although less well-preserved in comparison to those of Darius and Xerxes, King Artaxerxes III had his own splendid palace constructed on the acropolis during his reign. His palace was located in between the palace of Xerxes and the Apadana. The floor plan was roughly identical with that of Darius's palace. The western section of the palace was decorated with a series of horned stone crenellations.[68] Artaxerxes III also constructed a structure known as the Hall of 32 Columns on the acropolis, though its function is not known.

To the north of the Hall of 100 Columns is an unfinished gate started under the rule of Artaxerxes III, which was originally intended to be a counterpart to the Gate of All Nations. It is believed that from the mid-4th century on this served as the main access point to the terrace, with a thoroughfare known today as the "Army Road" or "Procession Road" leading from this entrance to the Gate of All Nations.[69] Located along the road were unfinished capitals carved in the shape of unusual eagle-headed griffins, believed to represent the *Huma* bird of Persian mythology.[70]

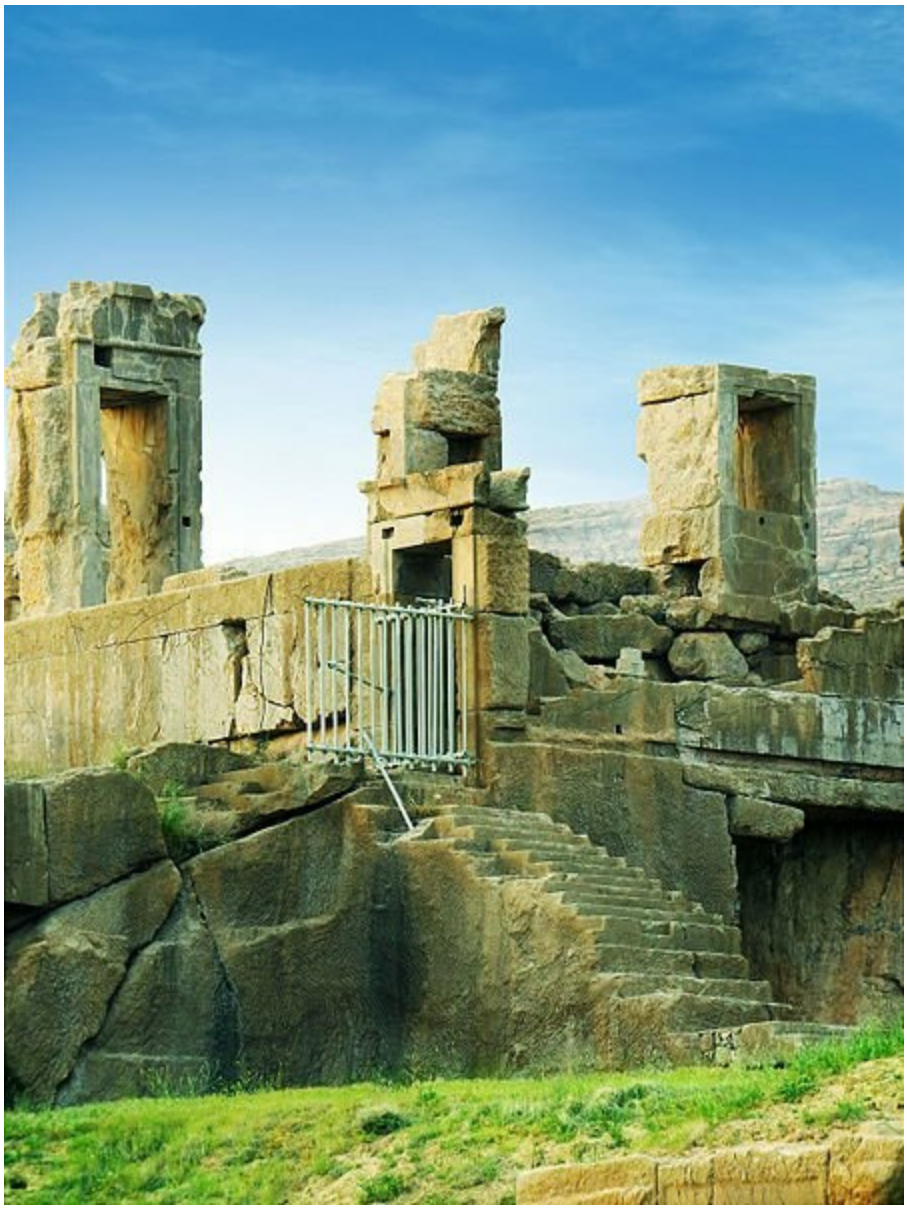
The incomplete status of the gate has provided scholars with a glimpse at the process by which many of the structures in Persepolis were built. For example, unfinished slabs were laid over one another before being carved into shape because the artists did not want to damage the lower parts with falling chips as they were working on the upper sections.

There were also a series of fortifications separating the acropolis from the lower city of Pérsēs, which surrounded the ceremonial core of Persepolis to the south, west, and northwest.[71] This area was likely occupied before Darius started construction of the terrace, though little is known about its earliest history. The lower city was an entire city of servant's houses, artisan's workshops, and everything else that served life in the king's court. Much of this is still waiting to be revealed by archaeologists, and for their secrets to be discovered.

The limited archaeological studies have revealed the foundations of a few large buildings, most of which were built in the traditional Persian style of

square-shaped mud bricks much like those of the acropolis. Many of the door jambs were made of stone, which was very abundant in Persepolis perched, as it was, on a terrace of rock. One is particularly well-preserved, showing a floor plan that consisted of a residential core including a central hall surrounded by smaller rooms, with a square courtyard accessed by a short flight of stairs.[72]

The lower city seems to have been looted and razed during the period of Alexander’s conquest and remained uninhabited after his armies had moved on.



Masoud Khalife's picture of the ruins on the eastern side of Persepolis

In Persia, if someone wanted to offer tribute to a deity, they would have been hard pressed to do so because there were no temples. All over Persia, altars have been found standing alone on open hilltops, and the traces left by fires during sacrifices can still be found. Along with other evidence, these have contributed to historians' understanding of the Persian religion.

For the Persians, all of creation was divine – the sky, the earth, and all of its elements. The Persians considered natural phenomena, such as water, wind, earth, and fire, as sacred attributes.[73] Hence, sacrifices were not held in an enclosed temple, but outside under the open sky. They offered their sacrifices to the sun, the sky, the moon, the earth, and fire. The earliest believers may have worshiped these as deities, thanks to their association with some of the most fundamental aspects of daily life.

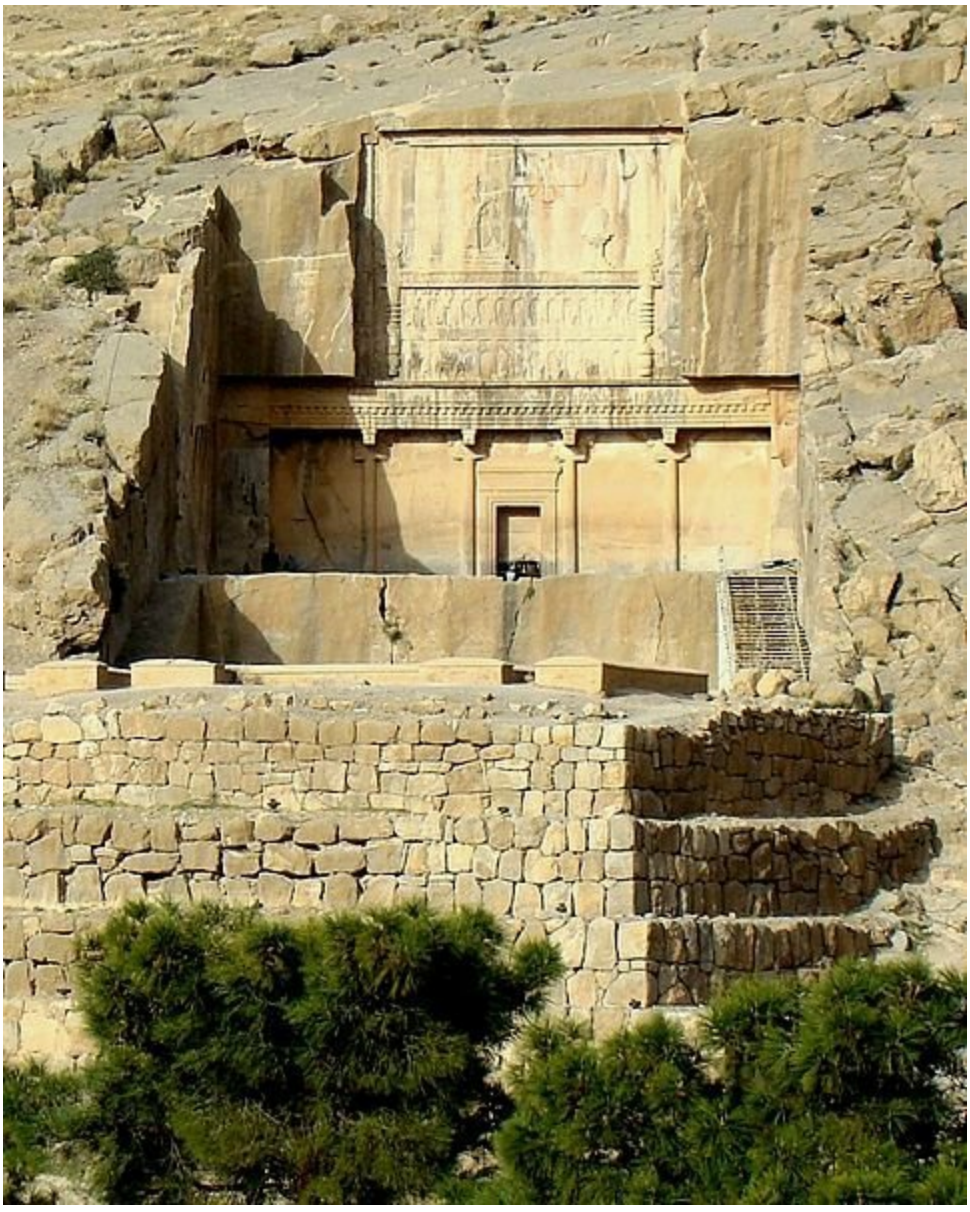
However, around the 8th century BCE, fundamental changes occurred in religious beliefs across the region, as demonstrated in the *Shahnameh* (the "Book of Kings") – an epic history of the Iranian people written sometime in the late first millennium CE by the Persian poet Ferdowsi. In this, it is made perfectly clear that these people had begun to believe in a sort of monotheism, which had been reformed and made more ethical by Zoroaster (Zarathustra) sometime during this time.[74] Although little is known of Zoroaster's life, other than that he was Persian, his teachings were not actually compiled and documented until as late as the third century CE – many centuries after his death. Nonetheless, his teachings of a dualistic religion, and of the eternal conflict between good/truth and evil/deception, had a profound impact on Persian society. Their faith was directed towards the worship of a single deity known as Ahura Mazda, who incarnated the supreme good. Other deities were reinterpreted as being nothing more than demons and devils.

A depiction of Zoroastrian symbols

Zoroastrianism became the principle religion of the Achaemenid dynasty. On the southern retaining wall of the acropolis terrace, there are two inscriptions that describe the extent and nature of its connection to Persian royal power. Both are written in the Aryan alphabet, a script created under the orders of King Darius I to be used for Achaemenid royal inscriptions. These attest to the importance of Ahura Mazda to the rulers of Persepolis.[75] Ahura Mazda was the principle Zoroastrian god, the lord of wisdom who was worshiped at fire temples. However, the Persians did not force the people of their empire to believe in Ahura Mazda. They allowed freedom of worship; sacrifices could be dedicated to any god they wished. The Jewish book of Ezra offers an independent account, in which the Persians are praised for liberating the Jews and allowing them to practice their religion freely.[76]

Two Achaemenid kings, Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III, had their tombs cut into the rock above Persepolis, on the sacred Kuh-e Mehr (Mountain of Mithra), which was known as the Kuh-e Ramat (Mount of Mercy) from the 13th century on.[77] This site was closely associated with the ancient Persian deity Mithra, god of oases and of the sun.[78] There were an additional four Achaemenid royal tombs excavated at Naqš-i Rustam, a necropolis located approximately twelve kilometers to the northwest of Persepolis. A few miles from Persepolis, archaeologists discovered a well-preserved small building

with a square foundation, known today as the Cube of Zoroaster.[79] What it was is still a mystery, sparking vigorous debate among scholars, not just because of its unknown origin but also for its location close to the walls of Mount Naqsh-e Rustam. There are several hypotheses regarding this site; some say that it is a temple of fire, and others believe that it is a watchtower.[80] The most alluring idea is that it was once a library where sacred texts were kept.[81]



O. Mustafin's picture of the Tomb of Artaxerxes III

Upon closer inspection, a number of figures were found carved into the

rock face. They appear to be in mourning for the death of their emperor, as evidenced by the cross-shaped incisions carved high in the rock face, each with an entrance elevated far from the ground. This is where kings Darius I, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II were buried, most in stone sarcophagi. Kings Artaxerxes IV and Darius III may also have been buried in the tomb of Artaxerxes II.

All six of these tombs share a similar form and decorative scheme, and are believed to have all been copied from that of Darius I.[82] They also share a resemblance with the carved façade of the Tachara; the king is shown on the tomb register as standing upon a platform that is carried by his servants. Depicted on these tombs are bas-reliefs that show the Persian king making sacrifices to a flame and to the god Ahura Mazda. In front of the tomb of Darius I is a well-preserved water basin, which is believed to have been used in funeral ceremonies.[83]

From Persepolis, the Persian kings managed their vast empire, and they were unique in how they envisaged how an empire should be run. Compared to the general consensus of the ancient world, in which cultures would seek to conquer, obliterate, and rebuild according to their own terms, this process was not the case with Persia, where political objectives were ensured through tolerance of cultural diversity. If subject nations paid their taxes and tribute to the Persian king, that was all that was required for them to continue living according to their own customs and cultural setting.

To avoid confusing babble, a common language was adopted during ceremonies and official acts: Old Persian. By using a language that they themselves had to study and learn, the Persians once again displayed their desire to create a common world that all would be able to belong to. Old Persian was the official language of the Persian bureaucracy – an important step between the creation of an empire encompassing many peoples to a state composed of a single people.[84]

The Persian representation of the empire as being multifaceted and tolerant of diversity was a dramatic departure from the imperial precedents of their forbearers. The subjects of earlier empires, such as of the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires, had also spoken and written many languages, but when it came to putting inscriptions into palaces and monuments of the rulers the

inscriptions were that of the rulers. In this way, the identity of the empire was expressed in the terms of the rulers. The languages of the Achaemenid inscriptions, by contrast, were unprecedented symbols of the relationships between rulers and the ruled, as they were frequently provided in both the official Old Persian language and the languages of their vassal states, namely Elamite and Akkadian.[85]

By allowing subject nations to live their own lives, the Persians ensured that a multiethnic and multilingual empire flourished in relative peace for 250 years. That said, it obviously took more than tolerance to maintain control over a territory that stretched nearly 3,000 miles from west to east. Empires need an infrastructure in order to maintain control.

50 miles outside of Persepolis, carved into the side of a hill, is an ancient Persian road leading to the city, and the sides of the road are up to 30 feet high.[86] Such feats of engineering were repeated across the empire, where a network of roads and highways allowed the Persians to get information, people, and materials from one corner of the empire to wherever the king was as quickly as possible. Even the Greeks could not fail to be impressed by the Persian road system, which stretched from Persepolis to Susa, and to Ecbatana via Pasargadae, and then 1,500 miles to the west to Ephesus on the Mediterranean.[87] Roads also went east to India. The Greeks were particularly amazed by the messengers that traveled along these roads, keeping the Persian kings at Persepolis informed of everything that occurred in the empire. The great Greek historian Herodotus wrote that “no mortal thing travels faster than these Persian couriers.”[88]

Such speed was possible because of another Persian innovation: the staging post. Thanks to this system, a messenger would ride on one horse and be able to quickly change animals at these garrisons located approximately every 20 miles along the highways before continuing their journey straight away.[89] Manned by Persian soldiers, the staging posts also ensured that for the first time in antiquity, traders and travelers could move around a vast tract of land in relative safety.

Much is known about the nature and structure of imperial power through the art discovered in the city. Archaeological investigations discovered two particularly interesting sculptured scenes showing the royal audience, one of

which is stored in the Iran National Museum and the other in the Persepolis Treasury. Both of these had originally ornamented the central façade of the Apadana stairways but were later removed to the treasury for unknown reasons.[90] The king appointed members of his family or his most trusted men to select positions. King Darius I is displayed enthroned beneath a canopy, and the heir to the throne, Xerxes, stands alongside several senior officials behind him. One of these officials is likely Pharnaces, the son of Arsames and the chief economic official, who was responsible for the payment of food gifts to the residents and visitors of the city.[91] The master of ceremonies stood before the throne and reported on the proceedings of the festivals. Ushers are depicted introducing the groups of gift-bearing delegations as they enter.

The exchange of gifts was, therefore, a key element in the Persian mechanisms of power and royal ideology, and the Apadana served as the principle location at which this took place.[92] It was, therefore, no surprise that Alexander the Great targeted this structure in particular to be destroyed.

One particularly interesting inscription discovered in the Queen's Quarters indicated that there might have been an element of competition when it came to a ruler's succession. Describing the ascension of Xerxes to the Persian throne after the death of Darius I, it reads, "My father Darius had other sons, but – thus was Ahuramazda's desire – my father Darius made me the largest after himself. When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king on my father's throne."[93]

Researchers from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago began to excavate the acropolis in 1931, and in 1933 they discovered fragments of tablets in two rooms of a gatehouse at the edge of the stone terrace. These became known as the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, as they had been discovered in the foundations of the ruined fortification wall that once surrounded the terrace. 30,000 fragments and whole tablets were found, which together provide one of the few sources of information about the workings of the empire that were written by the Persians themselves – information that we would otherwise never have access to. They were written in several languages, and composed of four main types of document: cuneiform texts in the Elamite language with impressions of seals; documents

written in the Aramaic language and script also with seal impressions; pieces with seal impressions but no text; and various miscellaneous and unique pieces in Greek, Phrygian, Akkadian, and the only tablet written in Old Persian ever discovered. Like a treasure trove of coins, these were stored together in antiquity and found together in modern times.

What do these tablets tell people about Persepolis? They were not about the deeds and characters of kings, or armies on the march, or the eunuchs and harem intrigues, or other things that Hellenistic writers and artists were interested in. They are mostly the receipts and invoices of the empire during a narrow time of fewer than 20 years around 500 BCE.[94] More specifically, they are the record of one particular aspect of the Persian Empire: the provision of food by a centralized body. They describe transactions involving a range of grains, beer, wine, animals, fruits, and vegetables for people that were on the Persian government's payrolls, including workers, craftsmen, clerks, travelers, and members of the king's own family. One records "one and a half-shekels of silver for carpenters making sculptures," and another details "one jug of wine each to the seventy-four Syrian laborers working on the columned hall."[95]

With their road infrastructure, the Persians could establish an extensive trading network across their empire, through which they acquired the luxury goods to maintain the loyalty of their elite. The purpose of luxury at Persepolis was mainly linked to their perceptions of power and the propaganda of kingship. To have superfluous articles of expensive clothing, or to have one's palace strewn with textiles, an expression of power and wealth through the conspicuous consumption of material goods.[96]

In that vein, one custom that both fascinated and appalled the Greeks was the Persian feast. Most of what is known of the Persian feast comes from Greek sources, who described the opulence of the objects used, and the amount of drinking that was an essential part of the proceedings. The Persians lived according to a principle of telling the truth – something that the Greeks, begrudgingly, admired in them. Drinking during feasts had an important social role; they tended to get very drunk, because they believed that only in doing so they would tell the truth and be able to effectively settle arguments.[97] Feasting brought groups together as a community, with

everyone partaking in the same food and engaging in the same experience.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Persians were renowned for their luxury. Records and archaeological evidence indicate that they purchased spices, gold, purple dyes, and reams of the finest textiles. Although all that remains today are bare stone pillars and walls, the halls and palaces of Persepolis were once splendidly decorated in sumptuous textiles.[98] These fabrics were a way of expressing status and would have been found on walls, all over the floors, and the furniture.[99]

The cost of the site must have been immeasurable, judging from its immense scale, the opulence of its decoration, and luxury of the ceremonies and events that took place there. It seems the Persians were able to afford it through state investment, and making sure the fertile region of the Persian homeland flourished under the Achaemenid rule. Agriculture served as their main form of income, and the Persepolis Fortification Tablets indicate that grain and other produce served as the primary means of paying taxes.

In addition to the tributes and taxes paid by their vassals within the empire, the Persian royalty profited from the extensive trade that took place across their realm along the land-based routes known as the Silk Road and maritime trade routes via the Persian Gulf. Due to their position, the Persians frequently acted as middlemen in transactions between their neighbors. Their economy made use of a system of standardized coinage, and they even had a form of banking system by which the market could be made secure.[100]

Gift giving was how the Persian kings reinforced the loyalty of their subjects, but they also had other, less benign, ways of exercising power. A bas-relief at Behistun, in northwestern Iran, shows the Persian king at his most ruthless. King Darius the Great is shown enslaving those who threatened his throne, and the prominent position of the image served as a public warning to those who may have considered resisting him.[101] Many ancient Greek accounts also suggest that the Persians ruled with an iron fist, including descriptions of how the Persians cut off the limbs and even noses of their prisoners.

However, the bas-reliefs at Persepolis seem to present a very different perspective. There the figures do not display the expected rigidity of court

rule or enslavement; instead, they appear relaxed, chatting and encouraging one another. They are depicted as holding one another's hands or shoulders, providing an image of peace and harmony. There are no battle scenes depicted in the city, and no violence in any form is demonstrated. Tolerant, peaceful, and wealthy, the Achaemenid kings believed that they were the masters of all that they surveyed.

The First Persian War

In 500 BCE, the major Greek city-states Sparta and Athens were not terribly interested in the affairs of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, and for the most part, the status of the Ionian Greeks, who were under Persian control, also mattered very little to them. Sparta stood at the head of an alliance/league of Peloponnesian city-states who were more concerned with their region, while Athens had recently abolished tyranny and was learning the intricacies of democratic government (Forrest 2001, 37).

While Athens was uninvolved, perhaps following the cue of their Athenian cousins, some of the Ionian, Aeolian, and Doric city-states in Anatolia revolted against their own tyrants, which was tantamount to rebellion against their Persian overlords (Forrest 2001, 37). Herodotus provided the best account of the Ionian Revolt, which was largely instigated by a former tyrant named Aristagoras, who believed that a successful revolt would place him in a powerful position. Herodotus wrote, "Certain substantial citizens of Naxos, forced by the commons to leave the island, took refuge in Miletus, which had been put under Aristagoras, son of Molpagoras, as deputy governor. He was nephew and son-in-law of Histiaeus, the son of Lysagoras, who was being detained by Darius at Susa . . . The first thing they did when they got there was to ask Aristagoras to lend them some troops, in the hope of recovering their position at home. This suggested to Aristagoras that if he helped the exiles to return he himself would be ruler of Naxos; so using their friendship with Histiaeus to cloak his purpose, he made them an offer." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 30).

Aristagoras had a keen sense of political acumen and a feel for the times, as a large part of his strategy was to gain the favor of the Ionians Greeks by promising the reward of democracy. First, he had to abdicate his own tyranny, which he did in public fashion. According to Herodotus, "To induce

the Milesians to support him, he began by professing to abdicate his tyranny in favor of a popular government, and then went on to do the same thing in the other Ionian states, where he got rid of the tyrants." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 37).

At the same time, Aristagoras knew that enticing the Ionian states to rebel would not be enough to defeat the mighty Achaemenid Empire. For that, he would need the support of one, or both, of the Ionian's mainland Greek cousins. However, Aristagoras' efforts to obtain the aid of Sparta and Athens against the Persians would lead to his demise and set the Athenians on a crash course with the Persians that would reach its apex at Marathon.

A map depicting the enormous extent of the Achaemenid Empire

Perhaps owing to the fierce reputation of the Spartan warriors, or simply due to the fact that Sparta was farthest from Ionia, Aristagoras visited Sparta first to plead for assistance against the Persians. At the time, Sparta's government was a type of republican-monarchy, in which adult males had voting rights at their councils but two kings presided over the city and largely decided on affairs of state such as diplomacy and war (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 7). When Aristagoras finally made it to Sparta, he met with the only reigning king of the time, Cleomenes, and at first tried to appeal to his patriotism, then

his pride, and finally his greed. Herodotus' account of Aristagoras' plea to Cleomenes reads, "I hope Cleomenes, that you will not be too much surprised at my anxiety to visit you. The circumstances are these. That Ionians should have become slaves in place of free men is a bitter shame and grief not only to us, but to the rest of Greece, and especially to you, who are the leaders of the Greek world. We beg you, therefore, in the name of the gods of Greece, to save from slavery your Ionian kinsmen. It will be an easy task, for these foreigners have little taste for war, and you are the finest soldiers in the world. The Persian weapons are bows and short spears; they fight in trousers and turbans – that will show you how easy they are to beat! Moreover, the inhabitants of that continent are richer than all the rest of the world put together – they have everything, gold, silver, bronze, elaborately embroidered clothes and beasts of burden and slaves. All this you may have if you wish." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 49).

Cleomenes' interest was apparently piqued until Aristagoras showed him a map of the vast Achaemenid Empire, to which the Spartan replied, "Your proposal to take Lacedaemonians a three months' journey from the sea is a highly improper one." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 50).

Unfazed by the Spartans' denial of his proposal, Aristagoras began to sail back to Ionia, but he stopped in Athens to present the citizens of that city-state with a similar offer. Aristagoras approached the Athenians at an opportune time, as they had recently expelled their tyrant Hippias, who was supported by the Persians, so they were already inclined to campaign against them (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 97). Aristagoras used many of the same arguments he tried with the Spartans, including the weakness of the Persian military and the riches of the Achaemenid Empire, but he also appealed to common ancestry that the Athenians and Ionians shared. Herodotus noted, "In addition to this he pointed out that Miletus had been founded by Athenian settlers, so it was only natural that the Athenians, powerful as they were, should help her in her need. Once persuaded to accede to Aristagoras' appeal, the Athenians passed a decree for the dispatch of twenty ships to Ionia, under the command of Melanthius, a distinguished Athenian." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 97).

Athenian support for the Ionian cause was lukewarm at best, and the entire

Ionian coalition soon crumbled under the weight of the mighty Achaemenid Empire. When the Persians were finally able to reestablish their rule over the rebellious Ionian city-states, Aristagoras fled and later died in exile, and the rebellious cities, especially Miletus, suffered under brutal punitive measures. (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 126). Herodotus graphically wrote about the punishment the Persians meted out to the Ionians: "Once the towns were in their hands, the best-looking boys were chosen for castration and made into eunuchs; the most beautiful girls were dragged from their homes and sent to Darius' court, and the towns themselves, temples and all, were burnt to the ground." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 32).

The ruthless suppression of the Ionian Revolt by the Achaemenid Persians proved to be the first act in the greater Greco-Persian Wars, and if the Athenians thought that their limited involvement in the affair would mitigate the ire of the Persian king Darius I (ca. 550-486 BCE), they were sorely mistaken. Through their involvement in the Ionian Revolt, despite the fact it was minimal for the most part, the Athenians set themselves at odds with the Persian emperor, putting them on a crash course that would culminate at the Battle of Marathon about nine years later.

An ancient depiction of Darius I

At the beginning of the 5th century BCE, the Greek city-states were as prone to fight each other as they were non-Greeks. The Persians on the other hand commanded the greatest empire the known world had ever witnessed – the Achaemenid Empire – which spanned from Bactria (present day Afghanistan) in the east to Egypt in the west (Briant 2002, 366). Besides possessing the already ancient and venerated kingdom of Egypt, the Achaemenid Persians also controlled the city of Babylon and the regions of Mesopotamia and the Levant, which were home to such illustrious previous cultures as Israel, the Phoenicians, and the Assyrians just to name a few. When viewed from this perspective, the Greek Ionian city-states were a small fraction of the total empire, and the more distant Athenians may have appeared to the Persians as little more than minor interlopers who were playing a dangerous game that was out of their league. That said, despite the fact that the Persians in general may have disregarded any military threat that the Athenians posed, Ionia was

still viewed as an important part of the Achaemenid Empire.

The Athenians no doubt raised the ire of Darius I when they supported the Ionian Revolt, but their direct interference in the affairs of the Achaemenid Empire was not their first transgression against the Persians. Before the Athenians inserted themselves into the Ionian Revolt, they were involved in a war with Sparta, and when that did not go well for them, they looked to Persia for an alliance. The Athenians sent envoys to the city of Sardis in Ionia to meet with the Persian governor, Artapherenes, who requested that the Greeks give a symbolic gift of earth and water to him. Herodotus explained, "To strengthen their position they sent representatives to Sardis, in the hope of concluding an alliance with Persia. When they got there and delivered their message, Artapherenes the son of Hystaspes, the governor, asked in reply who these Athenians were that sought an alliance with Persia, and in what part of the world they lived. Then, having been told, he put the Persian case in a nutshell by remarking that, if the Athenians would signify their submission by the usual gift of earth and water, then Darius would make a pact with them; otherwise they had better go home. Eager that the pact should be concluded, the envoys acted on their own initiative and accepted Artapherenes' terms – for which they were severely censured on their return to Athens." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 73).

As Herodotus wrote, the Athenian envoys were admonished for their act of obeisance towards the Persians, but the political damage had been done; the Athenians broke Persian protocol and tradition when they offered earth and water but did not give their obedience. Furthermore, around the time of the Athenian earth and water fiasco, Hippias, the tyrant who was expelled from Athens in 510 BCE, showed up in Sardis and urged Artapherenes and the Persians to restore him as tyrant of Athens (Olmstead 1948, 151-52). In fact, when the Persians finally set forward with their invasion plan of Greece, Hippias was with the Persian fleet, which indicates that the invasion was at least partially intended to restore Athens to tyranny (Doenges 1998, 2).

By breaking the standard Persian political protocol, the Athenians had placed themselves on the imperial radar of the Persians, but when they supported the Ionian Revolt, Darius I took the matter personally. The Persians were not the only one who committed atrocities during the Ionian

Revolt, as a combined force of Ionian Greeks and Athenians captured and sacked the city of Sardis and reduced its temple to rubble. When Darius I learned of the Athenians role in the sack of Sardis, he exploded. According to Herodotus, "The story goes that when Darius learnt of the disaster, he did not give a thought to the Ionians, knowing perfectly well that the punishment for their revolt would come; but he asked who the Athenians were, and then, on being told, called for his bow. He took it, set an arrow on the string, shot it up into the air and cried: 'Grant, O God, that I may punish the Athenians.'" (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V, 105).

To Darius I, the matter was settled: the Athenians must be taught a lesson and brought under the yoke of the Achaemenid Empire. That said, in the ancient world, it took a lot of time and resources to plan a large-scale military campaign, and the Persian invasion of Greece was no exception. The heart of the Achaemenid Empire was thousands of miles from Greece, so any major invasion would involve many logistical concerns, especially transportation of troops and resources, but Darius I was up for the challenge. The Persian army was led by the general Mardonius, who mustered his forces on land and sea in Ionia in 491 BCE, and his expedition into Greece would be the largest military expedition that world had ever seen. In fact, it was most likely intended to subjugate not only Athens but all of Greece.

From Ionia, Mardonius led the Persian army north along the Aegean coastline until they marched through Thrace and Macedonia. At this point, they encountered a storm that destroyed most of their ships (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 44). The disastrous loss of the Persian fleet only proved to be a temporary setback though, as the rich Achaemenid Empire was able to muster a new army, which was led by a general named Datis. Datis was ordered by Darius I to "reduce Athens and Eretria to slavery and to bring the slaves before the king." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 94).

Datis had many advantages over the Greeks, as he commanded overwhelming naval superiority and had the military intelligence of Hippias, the former tyrant of Athens, at his disposal (Doenges 1998, 2). Instead of following Mardonius' route the previous year around the Aegean, Datis led the Persian army by ships directly across the Aegean, reducing the island of Naxos to slavery but sparing Delos (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 95-98).

When Datis and the Persians arrived in Greece, they first set their sights on laying waste to Eretria. According to Herodotus, the Eretrians prepared themselves for a long siege but were betrayed by some of their own people: "The Eretrians had no intention of leaving their defenses to meet the coming attack in the open; their one concern (the proposal not to abandon the town having been carried) was to defend their walls – if they could . . . then on the seventh, two well-known Eretrians, Euphorbus the son of Alcimachus and Philagrus the son of Cyneas, betrayed the town to the enemy. The Persians entered, and stripped the temples bare and burnt them in revenge for the burnt temples of Sardis, and, in accordance with Darius' orders, carried off all the inhabitants as slaves." (Herodotus, *The* Histories, VI, 101)

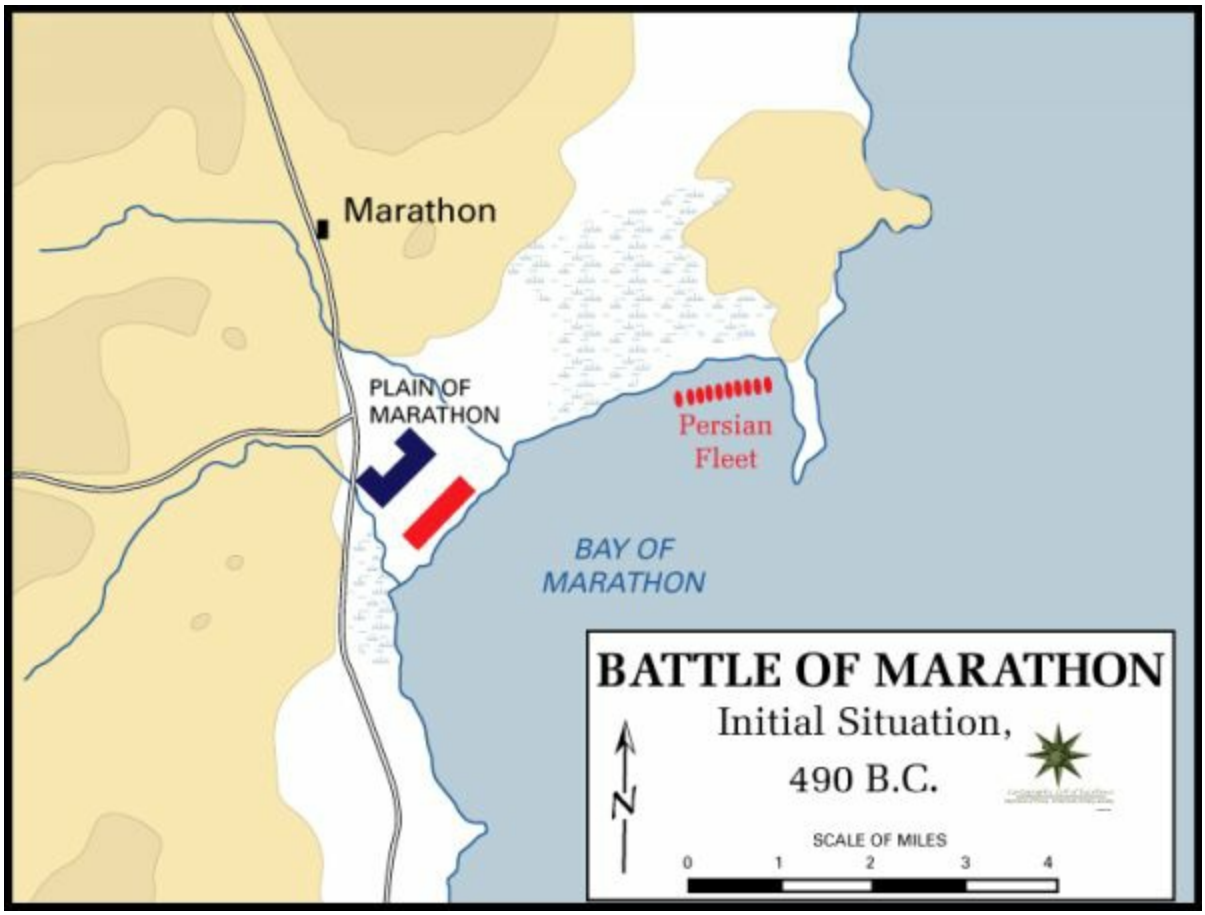
With Eretria reduced to rubble, Datis then turned his attention south to the Attica peninsula and the city of Athens, but unlike the Eretrians, the Athenians would be better prepared and would leave their city to meet the Persians on the plain near Marathon.

Although Athens was a decent sized city-state for the Hellenic world, it was puny compared to the Achaemenid Empire, making it impossible to make up for the numerical disparity in a number of ways. Nonetheless, Athens was still formidable. All Athenian citizens between the ages of 18-42 were eligible for military service (Sage 1996, 38), and the army was sub-divided by tribes, which were then commanded by lieutenants known as *taxiarchs* (Sage 1996, 38). Although the requirements for and basic structure of the Athenian military are known, much less is known about the men's training. During the period of the Battle of Marathon, there is no evidence for any formal training of hoplites in Athens, and the only Greek city-state where any significant training is recorded comes from Sparta (Sage 1996, 35). In other words, the Athenian military at the time of the Battle of Marathon was a sort of "home guard," where each male citizen was responsible for his part militarily and thus always prepared for war.

Herodotus is the most complete primary source concerning the Battle of Marathon, but others do exist or at least once did, that can help complement Herodotus' account. The oldest sources that depicted the Battle of Marathon were actually a series of pictures that were painted in the Poecile Stoa by the artists Micon and Paenus around 460 BCE, about 30 years after the battle

(Hammond 1968, 26). Unfortunately, the pictures are no longer extant, but the Greek geographer Pausanias gave a partial description in his geographic survey of Greece: “At the end of the painting are those who fought at Marathon; the Boeotians of Plataea and the Attic contingent are coming to blows with the foreigners. In this place neither side has the better, but the centre of the fighting shows the foreigners in flight and pushing one another into the morass, while at the end of the painting are the Phoenician ships, and the Greeks killing the foreigners who are scrambling into them.” (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I, 5.3). Pausanias’ description of the Poecile Stoa is useful because it corroborates Herodotus’ accounts, namely that the Plataeans were the only other Greeks besides the Athenians who fought the Persians. It also indicates the chaos of the Persians’ retreat.

The Battle of Marathon itself is believed to have taken place in September 490 BCE (Hammond 1968), and it is also thought to be the first amphibious battle in world history (Doenges 1998, 4). The Persians landed their invasion force near Marathon because it was believed to be good ground for them to maneuver their cavalry, which the Persian commander Datis believed would give him the edge over the Greek hoplites (Hammond 1968, 33). Although the plain around Marathon was good ground for cavalry and was no doubt a large part of the Persian decision to land there, its proximity to Eretria also played a role. Herodotus wrote, “The part of Attic territory nearest Eretria – and also the best ground for cavalry to maneuver in – was at Marathon. To Marathon, therefore, Hippias the son of Pisistratus directed the invading army, and the Athenians, as soon as the news arrived, hurried to meet it. The Athenian troops were commanded by ten generals, of whom the tenth was Miltiades.” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 102-103).



Disposition of the forces at Marathon

The appearance of the former Athenian tyrant, Hippias, is also important because he apparently provided useful intelligence to Datis and the Persians that revealed Marathon to be the best place for cavalry operations. It was also close to the recently conquered Eretria, and the close proximity to Eretria was logistically important to the Persians and their potential success not only at Marathon but also if they were to subject all of Attica and possibly Greece itself. Since the Persian army was so far removed from the nearest Achaemenid colonies (which were across the Aegean in Ionia), they were forced to use Eretria as a temporary base and source of their supply lines (Hammond 1968, 32). The short distance between Eretria and Marathon across the bay also provided a safe and quick route for the Persians to move goods and men.

As a result, the Persians assembled their army near Marathon, but the exact size of the army is still open to conjecture. Unfortunately, Herodotus never

gave a number for the combatants in the Persian army – only ships – so modern historians are forced to make educated guesses based on the size of the field, the number that Herodotus listed as killed, and the number of Persian ships. A recent study estimates that the number of Persian fighting men may have been around 12,000-15,000 men, which would not be much more than the army the Greeks fielded at Marathon (Doenges 1998, 6), but earlier studies, such as Hammond's, places the total number of the Persian army as high as 90,000. That said, Hammond noted that many of them would have been sailors and not infantry (Hammond 1968, 33).

Numbers aside, the two forces fought in a completely different way, which each side had perfected over decades, perhaps centuries, in their respective theaters of war. The Persian army was formed of contingents mustered from the furthest reaches of its vast empire, and though one might expect what was, in effect, a "multinational" force to adopt vastly different styles of fighting, ancient historians writing of the battle indicate there was a degree of standardization in their equipment. That said, it is possible the ancient historians who wrote of the battle, all of whom were Greek, decided to lump all Persian forces together by assuming one unit would have much the same equipment as the next, as was the case for the Greek soldiers. The Persian army that faced the Spartans and their Greek allies at Thermopylae was made up of infantry, cavalry and chariot units, each of them apparently equipped in a similar fashion. The infantry was what would be categorized by military historians as "light", thus not bearing heavy armor or weapons. Each individual Persian infantryman would be equipped with a light, short thrusting spear (which could also be thrown if necessary), a shortsword or saber, a light double-curved bow and a wicker shield. Shield sizes appear to have varied from unit to unit, but archaeological evidence from Persian sculpture seems to suggest that, generally speaking, the shields would cover the soldiers wielding them from knee to neck, while not being wide enough to create significant overlap with the ranks on either side.

Wicker might seem like a foolish material to construct a shield out of, but it was in fact remarkably effective in its own right. The wicker was, of course, extremely light, making it very easy to wield, but it was also effective in stopping slashes from light weapons and could also trap thrust weapons that penetrated it, making them extremely hard to withdraw. The cavalry and

charioteers also shared similar equipment, being armed with longer curved sabers for slashing, double-curved bows and javelins. It appears as though some units, particularly those from the Persian heartland, were also armed with double-headed axes, fearsome weapons which would have in all likelihood made them the Persian shock troops.

Armor for the Persian soldiers appears to have also been fairly standardized as well. This is because for much of the Persian infantry it was virtually non-existent. Though it's hard to imagine today, especially considering the Persians were going up against heavily armored hoplites, Persian soldiers appear to have worn no greaves, vambraces or any other form of arm or leg armor, and most units seem to have forgone helmets in favor of knotted rags about their heads, or light caps of metal or leather. To protect their torsos, the soldiers either wore nothing at all, or light back-and-breasts of leather, chain mail, or (very rarely) bronze scales. The elite Persian infantry, recruited from the Persian heartlands, and the famous "Immortals", the Emperor's 10,000 strong personal guard, might have been more heavily armored, but generally speaking they were far from protected.

The reasons for this extremely light equipment are simple: aside from the monumental cost of equipping such a massive army like the one the Persians fielded with heavy armor and weapons, they were simply not suited to the climate in which the Persian army conducted much of its operations. The scorching desert plains of Asia Minor and Egypt, the near-impassable mountains of Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush, and the sweltering heat of the Punjab were not battlefields suited for heavy iron, steel or bronze armor, which weighed soldiers down and, in such extremes of temperature, might well carry them off altogether from heatstroke or fatigue. Thus, the standard Persian tactic was to shower similarly lightly-armed opponents with waves of arrows and javelins from a distance before closing with the weakened ranks of the enemy and cutting them to pieces with their short swords and sabers. The cavalry and charioteers would also most likely fight in a similar fashion, rather than in the knee-to-knee heavy cavalry charge of the middle ages or the Napoleonic battlefields more familiar to the West.

The Greeks, by contrast, fought in a vastly different manner. To begin with, while many of the Persian soldiers were conscripts (with the exception of

some elite corps, like the Immortals, service in which was one of the greatest honors available in the Persian Empire), all of the Greek infantrymen were volunteers, and generally far better-trained ones. Each city-state required its volunteers to undertake city-wide annual or bi-annual military exercises, and the Spartans, the backbone of the Greek force, literally spent their entire life training and preparing for war, with manual labor entrusted to their serfs, the helots. It is not entirely clear why Sparta placed such a great emphasis on having a militaristic society, but it resulted in making military fitness a preoccupation for the Spartans from birth. Spartan babies with even the slightest hint of physical deformities were left to die, while the fortunate ones began their military training at the age of 7 years old. Every Spartan male had to join the army at 18.

Thus, the backbone of the Greek way of war was the citizen-soldier, and aside from some notable exceptions, like Boeotia, they fielded armies made up almost exclusively of infantry. While that might sound like a disadvantage against more diverse opposing forces that included archers or chariots, the Greeks weren't using just any infantry. Their main strength was the hoplite – a soldier about as different from his Persian counterpart as could possibly be.

Most historians believe that the hoplite became the dominant infantry soldier in nearly all the Greek city-states around the 8th century B.C. Hoplites were responsible for acquiring their own equipment, so not every hoplite might have been equally armed, but considering the style of warfare, they needed as much uniformity as possible.

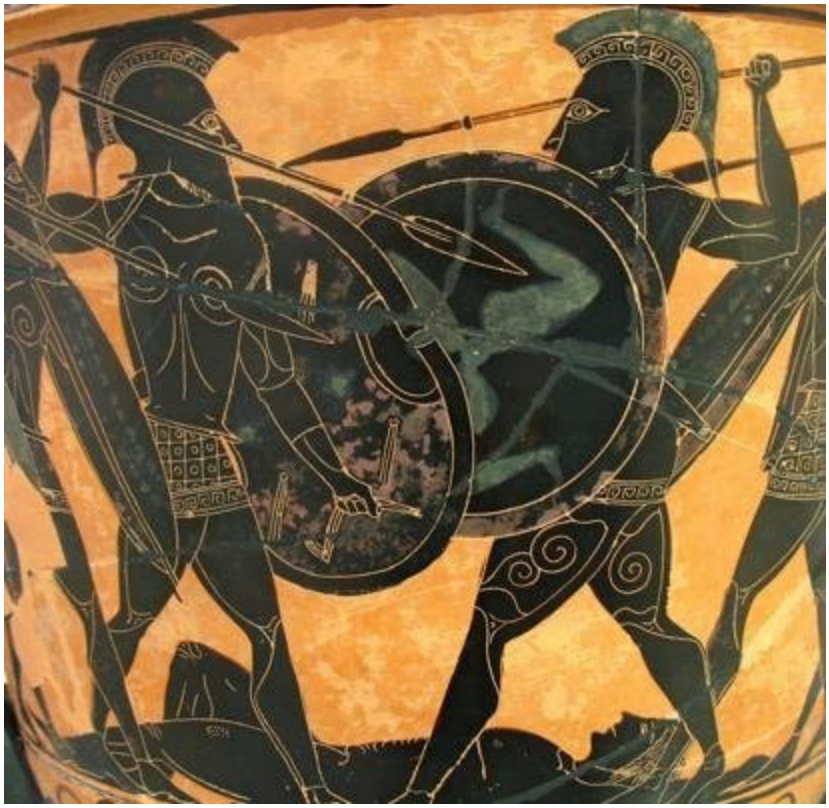
Like the Persian infantry, the hoplites also carried spears, but while the Persian weapons were short and light, the Greek spears were thick shafts anywhere between seven and nine feet long. These spears were topped by a 9-inch spearhead, with a "lizard-sticker" buttspike at the bottom which could be used as a secondary spearhead if the main weapon was snapped off, or to plant the spear upright when at rest. Each hoplite also carried a shortsword, designed specifically for thrusting in the close confines of a melee (the Spartan weapon, the *xiphos,* was so short as to be virtually a dagger, its blade barely over a foot long). Unlike the Persian infantry, the hoplites did not carry bows. Though the Greeks did employ light infantry, in the form of slingers, javelineers and archers, their role was extremely secondary to that of

the heavy infantry.

This was largely due to the armor which each hoplite wore into battle, which consisted of bronze greaves covering the wearer from ankle to knee, a skirt of leather or quilted linen to protect the groin area, and a heavy breastplate made either of bronze or quilted linen under overlapping bronze scales. To protect their heads, the hoplites wore the famous helmet that is perhaps their most iconic feature, a full-face bronze helmet with high flaring cheek-pieces and a thick nasal that obscured and protected their faces completely, topped by a horsehair crest that added another foot to their height. Helmets were worn front-to-back for line infantry and sideways for officers, to make them more recognizable to their own troops in the heat of battle.

Armored from head to foot in iron and bronze, the hoplite was the tank of his age, but the most important feature of his equipment was undoubtedly his shield. Weighing in at over 30 pounds, the *hoplon* or *aspis* was a great wooden bowl over three feet in diameter, made of heavy oak fronted with bronze and covering each hoplite from knee to neck, as well as providing a significant overlap with the shields of his companions in the battle-line. Obviously, these armaments did not lend themselves to the style of fighting the Persians favored. There could be no standing off and engaging the enemy at a distance with the Greek hoplites carrying short swords and thrusting

spears, and because of the weight of their equipment (which was up to 70-90 pounds all told),



Greek art depicting hoplites fighting

19th Century illustration of a Hoplite

For the Greeks, a hoplite was only as strong as the hoplite next to him; without hoplites on the sides, both flanks were exposed, and heavy infantry units are not mobile. Thus, the Greeks implemented the phalanx formation, one of history's most important military innovations. The phalanx was a line of infantry as wide across as the battlefield dictated, anything from five to 30 men deep, with each rank of men officered by a veteran. The formation also included an additional, expert file-closer at the back of each file, to keep the formation cohesive.

The phalanx advanced slowly to maintain its tight formation and unit cohesion, speeding up in unison just before reaching combat. The vast hoplite shields overlapped one another significantly, forming an uninterrupted wall of oak and bronze over which the first rank, while holding out their shields, would use their short swords to stab at the enemy in front of him, while the ranks immediately behind the first rank would slash at enemies with their spears over the top of the first line. Because each soldier's right flank was shielded by his companion's shield (all shields were strapped to the left arm, to preserve the integrity of the formation; left-handed fighters did not exist),

the phalanx, especially in the case of less well-trained units, had a tendency to edge to the right, which the Greeks countered by placing their elite troops to the right as a bulwark. The rows in back of the first line would also use their shields to help hold up the hoplites in the front and help them maintain their balance. The formation and method of attack was designed to physically overpower the enemy and scare them, lowering their morale. The phalanx as a fighting unit fell out of favor by the height of the Roman Empire, but the principles behind it remained in use for subsequent infantry formations lasting past the American Civil War. As the Greeks relied on the hoplite to defend other hoplites and concentrate their attack, infantry units in the gunpowder age relied on concentrated gunfire to stun and scare the enemy. And as military commanders learned time and again throughout the ages, if soldiers were not packed shoulder to shoulder in a tight formation, they were far more likely to flee.

Ultimately, though this is a subject of some contention, much of the consensus argues that the main strength of the hoplite phalanx was its utter inexorability when it operated as a cohesive, immaculately drilled unit – an unstoppable juggernaut which relied less on the initial clash of shield-walls (hoplites never advanced at a run, to preserve their formation) than on the relentless pushing force of their advance to shatter the enemy formation.

The first major decision that the Athenians would face was to either prepare the city's defenses for a siege or wait for help from other Greeks, such as the Spartans, to arrive. The other choice was to meet the much larger Persian force on the battlefield near Marathon. There was merit to both arguments, and in true Greek fashion both sides were heard, but ultimately it was the general Miltiades who swayed the opinion of the other generals to meet the Persians on the battlefield: "Amongst the Athenian commanders opinion was divided: some were against risking a battle, on the ground that the Athenian force was too small to stand a chance of success; others – and amongst them Miltiades – urged it . . . To Callimachus, therefore, Miltiades turned. 'It is now in your hands, Callimachus,' he said, 'either to enslave Athens, or to make her free and to leave behind you for all future generations a memory more glorious than even Harmodius and Aristogeiton left. Never in our history have we Athenians been in such peril as now. If we submit to the Persians, Hippias will be restored to power – and there is little doubt what

misery must then ensue: but if we fight and win, then this city of ours may well grow to pre-eminence amongst all the cities of Greece' . . . Miltiades' words prevailed, and by the vote of Callimachus the War Archon the decision to fight was made." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 109-110).

The Athenians thus decided to meet the Persians on the battlefield, and it is generally believed that they took the northern route from Athens to Marathon, which is about 25 miles long (Doegnes 1998, 7). The only other road to Marathon was slightly longer at about 28 miles and would have left the Greeks more exposed to a cavalry attack (Doegnes 1998, 7). After the Greeks arrived, the two sides faced each other in an uneasy calm that lasted for a few days before the battle, which helped the Greeks fortify their forces and better prepare for battle.

Once the Greeks arrived on the plain, they camped at a site that was considered to be sacred to the hero Hercules, and they were then joined by the Plataean Greek contingent. According to Herodotus, "The Athenian troops were drawn up on a piece of ground sacred to Heracles, when they were joined by the Plataeans, who came to support them with every available man." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 108).

The total number of Greeks who were camped at the plain near Marathon is estimated to be around 10,000 total, with about 1,000 of the hoplites being Plataeans (Hammond 1968, 34). Although most of the Athenian hoplites traveled to Marathon to confront the Persians, a small skeleton crew stayed behind in Athens in order to defend the city in case the Persian forces split and part attacked the city (Hammond 1968, 34).

Datis and the Persians were eager to engage the Greeks in battle as they had the advantage with numbers and cavalry, but the Greeks were not yet done with their preparations that would help give them the ultimate advantage. In the days before the actual battle, the Greeks probably gradually advanced their position, felling trees along the way and then using those trees to obstruct the Persian cavalry (Hammond 1968, 39). Thus, by the time the Greeks had advanced to the actual battlefield, they tried to be protected in their rear and flanks by the rugged hillsides, which effectively made the Persian cavalry useless (Hammond 1968, 39). This strategy was a major factor in how the Greeks won the battle, because the vaunted and feared

Persian cavalry played almost no role in the Battle of Marathon, and the Greek hoplites were much better armored and trained than the average Persian soldiers, who wore little armor.

In essence, Miltiades and the Greeks knew that in order to defeat the larger Persian army they had to plan accordingly and win the battle before the first blow was struck, while Datis became too reliant on his cavalry and was unwilling to improvise. Still, while the decisions made by Miltiades and Datis before the actual battle may have ultimately decided the victor, the two sides still had to fight, and it turned out to be an epic battle that has rightfully earned its legendary reputation.

In pre-modern warfare, the standard order of battle usually involved the belligerent armies lining up in shield wall, or *phalanx*, across from each other and then fighting with the ultimate goal of breaking through the enemy's line. Herodotus' description of the Battle of Marathon appears to follow this method: "When it did come, the Athenian army moved into position for the coming struggle. The right wing was commanded by Callimachus – for it was the regular practice at that time in Athens that the War Archon should lead the right wing; then followed the tribes, in their regular order; and, finally, on the left wing, were the Plataeans." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 111).

The fact that the Athenian field marshal (War Archon), Callimachus, was on one of the wings instead of the center is another important aspect of the battle that will be discussed further below, but as the two armies met, the Greeks were forced to compensate for their numerical inferiority, so Callimachus, Miltiades and the other Greek generals were faced with a choice: concentrate their forces in the center (where the initial Persian thrust would probably be focused) or place the majority of their forces on the wings in order to prevent being flanked. According to Herodotus, the Greeks chose the second option: "One result of the disposition of Athenian troops before the battle was the weakening of their center by the effort to extend the line sufficiently to cover the whole Persian front; the two wings were strong, but the line in the centre was only a few ranks deep. The dispositions made, and the preliminary sacrifice promising success, the word was given to move, and the Athenians advanced at a run towards the enemy, not less than a mile away . . . They were the first Greeks, so far as we know, to charge at a run, and the

first who dared to look without flinching at Persian dress and the men who wore it; for until that day came, no Greek could hear even the word Persian without terror." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 112).

Perhaps the most interesting and strategically important aspect of this passage is the fact that the Greeks ran to meet the Persians. At first, one may think that running to meet the enemy on the battlefield would be disadvantageous, especially a mile away, because it could tire the runners out, but there are some advantages to the strategy as well. Combatants in pre-modern battles had to be in good physical shape given the nature of the hand-to-hand fighting, so a brisk run to meet the enemy would raise soldiers' heart rates and help get them in the proper frame of mind as the battle began. In effect, the mile or so that the Greek hoplites ran across the plain of Marathon to meet the Persian army was a warm-up for the main event, which was the actual battle.

Modern scholars have also pointed out that when the Greeks sprinted to meet the Persians, they eliminated one of the advantages that the Persians had: cavalry. Once the two armies became engaged and the Greek flanks were protected by the hilly terrain, the Persian cavalry threat was eliminated (Hammond 1968, 40). The other Persian advantage – numerical superiority – was countered by the Greek formation of the battle line, which would prove to be the ultimate undoing of Datis and his army.

However, once the battle began, it was not long before the thin Greek center collapsed. A burial mound that was discovered and excavated in modern times marks where the Greek center stood, and also where the Greeks suffered most of their casualties (Hammond 1968, 18). Herodotus' account tells how the Persians pushed through the center: "The struggle at Marathon was long and drawn out. In the centre, held by the Persians themselves and the Sacae, the advantage was with the foreigners, who were so far successful as to break the Greek line and pursue the fugitives inland from the sea; but the Athenians on one wing and the Plataeans on the other were both victorious . . . Drawing their two wings together into a single unit, they turned their attention to the Persians who had broken through in the center." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 113).

The wings were instrumental to Greek victory, as they essentially ceded the

center to the Persians but then collapsed on their enemy from the wings. Herodotus, who had no military experience and was not well versed in military affairs, does not mention if the Greeks planned the maneuver in such a way, but logic would seem to indicate that they did. Up until this point in the battle, everything that Miltiades and Callimachus did was precise and well-thought out, from the road they took to Marathon, to where they chose to camp, and even the decision to sprint to engage the Persians. As such, it would be hard to believe that the Greek generals did not plan to collapse the wings as well. Hammond noted, "Now it is obvious that the action of the Athenians and the Plataeans on the wings, which were separated from one another by a considerable distance, had been preconcerted; for Miltiades, having thinned his centre and packed his wings, must have anticipated the actual developments in the fighting and issued orders in advance to the effect that the men on the wings, if and when victorious, were to turn towards the centre, to form line and to go to the aid of the Greek troops of the centre." (Hammond 1968, 29).

Hannibal's victory against the Romans at Cannae has often been considered the seminal use of a pincers attack of this type, and it is still considered a masterpiece of generalship that was imitated about 2,000 years later by Napoleon at Austerlitz, but if Hammond is correct, Miltiades and Callimachus orchestrated a pincers attack at Marathon centuries before Hannibal did. Either way, it's clear that Miltiades and the other Greek generals aided their cause and evened the odds by planning for contingencies. On the other hand, despite numerous advantages, Datis and the Persians were unable to capitalize on their superior numbers at the center of the line, and their cavalry was useless (Doenges 1998, 12).

Once the Greek flanks collapsed on the Persian center, Datis knew that phase of the battle was lost, so he ordered the Persians to retreat to the ships. Herodotus wrote very little about the Persian retreat other than that the Greeks captured seven Persians ships and that two Greek generals, Callimachus and Stesilaus, were killed pursuing the Persians (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 114-115), but Pausanias helps fill in the gaps. He wrote that the disastrous Persian retreat may have been partially due to them not knowing the terrain and running into a marsh: "There is at Marathon a lake which for the most part is marshy. Into this ignorance of the roads made the

foreigners fall in their flight, and it is said that this accident was the cause of their great losses." (Pausanias, *Geography of Greece*, I, 32,7).

Datis and the Persians were losing, but they were not yet defeated, so he and his surviving army that made it to the ships set sail around the Attic peninsula for Athens (Morkot 1996, 75). The quickest way for the Persians to reach Athens from Marathon was by land, and preferably on horseback, but once the Greeks defeated them at Marathon, they had to sail the entire way to Athens (Hodge 2001, 247). At this point, the Greek victory on the battlefield of Marathon was assured, but all may have been lost if Datis and the Persians could reach Athens before them. Plutarch succinctly captured the Greek urgency as they raced back to Athens on foot: "When the Athenians had routed the Barbarians and driven them aboard their ships, and saw that they were sailing away, not toward the islands, but into the gulf toward Attica under compulsion of wind and wave, then they were afraid lest the enemy find Athens empty of defenders, and so they hastened homeward with nine tribes, and reached the city that very day. But Aristides was left behind at Marathon with his own tribe, to guard the captives and the booty." (Plutarch, *Aristides*, 4-5).

One of the most legendary aspects of the Battle of Marathon, at least in terms of how it resonates in modern society, is the story of the runner named Phillippides or Pheidippides. According to the later Greek historian Plutarch and the 2nd century CE Greek writer Lucian, Pheidippides ran a little over 26 miles from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens in order to tell the citizens of that city that the Greeks had won the battle. Lucian wrote, "Phillippides, the one who acted as courier, is sad to have used it first in our sense when he brought the news of victory from Marathon and addressed the magistrates in session when they were anxious how the battle had ended; "Joy to you, we've won." he said, and there and then he died, breathing his last breath with that, "Joy to you." (Lucian, *A Slip of the Tongue in Greeting*, 3).

After the Battle of Marathon, Darius I was not done with his punitive plans for Athens. According to Herodotus, the Persian loss at Marathon only incensed the Achaemenid king even more: "When the news of the battle of Marathon reached Darius, son of Hystaspes and king of Persia, his anger against Athens, already great enough on account of the assault on Sardis, was

even greater, and he was more than ever determined to make war on Greece. Without loss of time he dispatched couriers to the various states under his dominion with orders to raise an army much larger than before; and also warships, transports, horses, and grain. So the royal command went round; and all Asia was in an uproar for three years, with the best men being enrolled in the army for the invasion of Greece, and with the preparations. In the year after that, a rebellion in Egypt, which had been conquered by Cambyses, served only to hard Darius' resolve to go to war, not only against Greece but against Egypt too." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VII, 1).

Darius would never get his chance to exact revenge against the Athenians, as he died soon after in 487 BCE (Forrest 2001, 41), but the Greco-Persian Wars would continue with his son and successor, Xerxes, who would lead an even greater army into Greece.

Achaemenid Persian historical records say nothing of the Battle of Marathon and little concerning the Greco-Persian wars, which is not surprising since the Persian historical tradition was essentially inherited from other ancient Near Eastern traditions that depicted the sovereign as always victorious (Cameron 1983, 80-81). Even had the Persians followed more modern or Hellenic historiographical traditions, they still would have ignored their loss at Marathon due to its one-sidedness. According to Herodotus, the final casualty count of the battle was 5,400 Persians killed while the Greeks only lost 192 men (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 117).

The Second Persian War

Although it is known that Xerxes I became Darius I's successor, the method of succession remains problematic for modern scholarship (Briant 2002, 518-25) and is an important factor when considering reasons why the Persian king initiated the second round of the Greco-Persian Wars. Herodotus (The Histories, VII, 2-4), gives a long account of Xerxes accession to the throne, which he attributed to a combination of the crown prince's mother, Atossa, and the fact that Xerxes was born while Darius I was king, unlike his older brothers who were born before he was king. Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions from the ancient Persian city of Persepolis attribute Xerxes' rise to power to the god Ahuramazda. A text known as "Xerxes Persepolis a" (XPa) states, "Saith Xerxes the King: Other sons of Darius there were, (but) –

thus unto Ahuramazda was the desire – Darius my father made me the greatest after himself. When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the will of Ahuramazda I became king on my father's throne. When I became king, I built much excellent (construction). What had been built by my father, that I protected, and other building I added." (Kent 1953, 150).

The text is clearly aimed at proving the new king's legitimacy to rule the Achaemenid Empire, which suggests that there may have been questions within the royal family about Xerxes' right to rule. The text also relates that Xerxes dedicated at least a portion of his time and resources to building projects, which was a way that many kings from various ancient Near Eastern cultures legitimized their rule.

Given that he had rebellions to suppress and possibly questions about his legitimate right to rule, it's fair to wonder why Xerxes embarked on a Herculean effort to invade Greece shortly after his father had been defeated. In answering that question, Herodotus relates in detail that when Xerxes came to power in 486 BCE, his geopolitical interests were to the south of Greece, in Egypt. As Xerxes prepared his punitive expedition against the Egyptians, the Persian general Mardonius, who was famous for losing the Persian fleet in Greece during the reign of Darius I, convinced the Great King to also invade Greece. Herodotus wrote, "Xerxes at first not at all interested in invading Greece but began by building up an army for a campaign in Egypt. But Mardonius – the son of Gobryas and Darius' sister and thus cousin to the king – who was present in court and had more influence with Xerxes than anyone else in the country, used constantly to talk to him on the subject. 'Master,' he would say, 'the Athenians have done us great injury, and it is only right they should be punished for their crimes. By all means finish the talks you already have in hand; but when you have tamed the arrogance of Egypt, then lead an army against Athens. Do that, and your name will be held in honour all over the world, and people will think twice in future before they invade your country.' And to the argument for revenge he would add that Europe was a very beautiful place; it produced every kind of garden tree; the land there was everything that land should be – it was, in short, too good for any mortal except the Persian king." (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 5).

Mardonius' influence was apparently effective, because Xerxes heeded the call to arms with the further incentives of upholding family honor and retribution for the Athenians' destruction of the city of Sardis during the Ionian revolt. Xerxes proclaimed, "I will bridge the Hellespont and march an army through Europe into Greece, and punish the Athenians for the outrage they committed upon my father and upon us. As you saw, Darius himself was making his preparations for war against these men; but death prevented him from carrying out his purpose. I therefore on his behalf, and for the benefit of all my subjects, will not rest until I have taken Athens and burnt it to the ground, in revenge for the injury which the Athenians without provocation once did to me and my father. These men, you remember, came to Sardis with Aristagoras the Milesian, a slave of ours, and burnt the temples and sacred groves." (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 8).

These two passages reveal both Xerxes' initial reluctance to attack Greece and his passionate personality, both of which were important for how the fighting turned out, but either way, once the emperor was in favor of an invasion of Europe, the great Persian army would have to be mobilized and moved from Asia to Europe.

The Persian army's mobilization and mustering was no doubt the largest type in history until that time and was probably the largest until the First Crusade about 1,500 years later. The logistical feat of just assembling the army took years, and according to Herodotus, the amount of materials consumed by the army was immense. The historian wrote, "For the four years following the conquest of Egypt the mustering of troops and the provision of stores and equipment continued, and toward the close of the fifth Xerxes, at the head of his enormous army, began his march. . . All these armies together, with others like them, would not have equaled the army of Xerxes. Was there a nation in Asia that he did not take with him to Greece? Save for the great rivers, was there a stream his army drank from that was not drunk dry? Some nations provided ships, others formed infantry units; from some cavalry was requisitioned, from others horse-transports and crews; from others, again, triremes for floating bridges, or provisions and naval craft of various kinds." (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 20-21).

The mustering of the army took place in Sardis from 484-481 BCE, after

which they then set out in the spring of 480 for their long trek to Greece following the Aegean coastline. Before the army left Sardis, Xerxes sent representatives throughout Greece to demand the symbolic “earth and water” from the various kingdoms and city-states (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 32). Earth and water, if given, was a symbol of a ruler’s obeisance and fealty towards the Persian king; the Persian king in turn agreed to leave the subordinate ruler in power and to do no harm to any of his temples or people (Briant 2002, 145). At the same time, however, Xerxes sent no demand for earth and water to the two most important Greek city-states – Athens and Sparta – because the Persian messengers were killed when his father, Darius I, sent demands for earth and water during the first war (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 133). It would also have been contrary to the partly punitive aspect of Xerxes’ expedition against Athens to demand earth and water, since Xerxes did not want the obedience of the Athenians but to destroy and enslave them.

According to Herodotus, the entire army – soldiers, sailors, marines, and various support personnel – numbered 1,700,000 (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 60) and it took them an entire week to bridge and cross the Hellespont, which is a channel in the Aegean that separates Asia from Europe (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 56). While it’s almost certain that number was inflated, the most important number concerning the size of the Persian army in relation to the Battle of Salamis was the 1207 triremes (war ships) that Herodotus said comprised the Persian fleet. Since Persia was a landlocked country, nearly the entire navy was gathered from other peoples, including 300 of the ships being manned by Phoenicians and 200 sailed by Egyptians (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 89-96).

Of course, Xerxes and the Persians were not the only ones who prepared for the coming war. As the great Persian army began its long march into Europe, the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, also made preparations that would ultimately ensure their victory at the Battle of Salamis. Recognizing that war was in all likelihood an inevitability, the Athenians had begun the construction of a giant fleet, but because Athens could not hope to bear the expense of both treasure and manpower of funding both a standing army and a fleet, they had sought support elsewhere. The chief Greek states, ignoring the ambassadors that Xerxes sent to demand earth and water in 481 BCE, met

at Corinth to decide on what was to be done. Their resolve was an indication of the measure of the crisis they faced, for the Greek city-states were notoriously fractious and only came together in times of the greatest emergency.

At the Hellespont, Xerxes planned to cross the straits via a gigantic bridge of boats, an incredibly ambitious endeavor and one that ends with one of antiquity's most colorful legends. Herodotus reported that the Persians' first attempt to bridge the Hellespont failed after a storm destroyed the flax and papyrus cables of the bridges. Enraged, Xerxes ordered his men to whip the Hellespont with 300 lashes and throw fetters into the water.

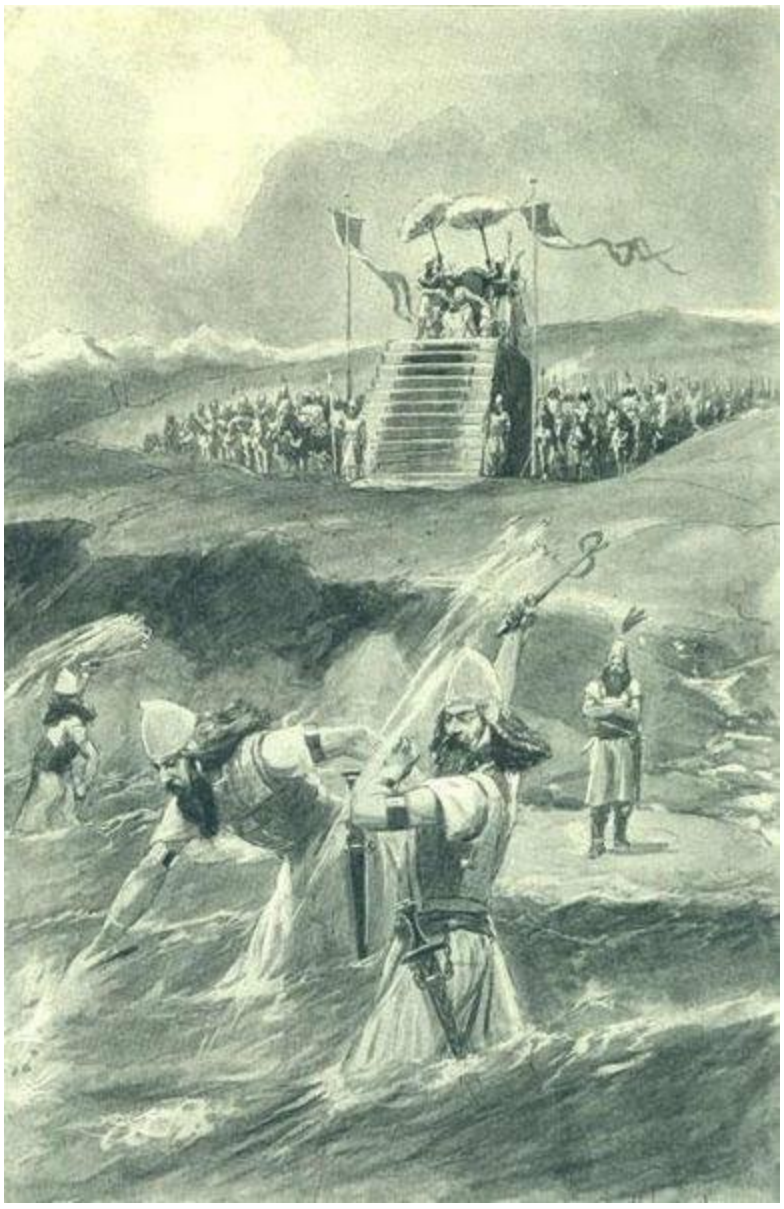


Illustration of Xerxes ordering his men to whip the Hellespont, 1909

After the meeting at Corinth, a force of 10,000 allied troops, under the command of the Spartans, was sent to blockade the pass of Tempe, in Thessaly, only to discover that Xerxes had stolen a march on them. Despite the first failure, the Persians had actually accomplished the unthinkable and physically bridged the Hellespont in 480 B.C., crossing into northern Greece to the south of the hoplites waiting at Tempe. There was now only one way to stop Xerxes; to cross into Greece proper, the Persians would be forced to travel through the narrow defile of the mountain pass at Thermopylae, a site which had already seen its fair share of battle due to its strategic nature. If the Greeks could hold Xerxes off at Thermopylae, and concurrently if the allied fleet could stop the Persian navy at Artemisium to prevent a bypass, then the invasion of Greece could be defeated.

The Spartans, as expected, were put in command of all allied land forces. Their prowess in battle, born of the fact that all Spartan citizens trained from boyhood in the ruthless warrior academy of the *agoge* to be perfect in the pursuit of feats of athletics and arms (and something they were able to do free of constraints as they delegated all manual labor to the helots) was legendary, and their fame rightly acquired. The Spartan hoplites were very rarely defeated, and the sight of their red-cloaked hoplites, with the Lambdas (Greek letter “L”, shaped line an inverted “V”, for Laekedaemon, the Spartan heartland) stark on their shields, was often enough to prompt enemies to flee the field altogether.

The Greeks set about making their preparations while Xerxes’ army advanced south through Thessaly and Macedonia, a horde to end all hordes. There has been intense speculation and debate among historians as to just how large the Persian army was, with ancient accounts reporting that it drank rivers dry and stripped entire regions of their crops. Though Herodotus and the other Greek sources talk of a force numbering anything between a million and two and a half million fighting men, with equivalent numbers of support personnel, these figures are in all likelihood exaggerated, the product of either Greek propaganda or Persian misinformation. Modern scholars believe Xerxes’ army was a more manageable but still extremely formidable 300,000-500,000 men, and the lowest modern estimates put the number at

100,000. Even the celebrated Spartans would have their work cut out for them.

Indeed, the campaign might well be over before it had properly begun, for the timing of Xerxes' advance could not have been more unfortunate for the Greeks. As the Persians approached Thermopylae, the Spartans were engaged in celebrating the festival of Carneia, the traditional period of peacetime in Laekedaemon during which time no armies could march, on pain of offending the Gods in the gravest way possible. One of the two Spartan kings, Leonidas (the Spartans always had two monarchs, so that if one should fall in battle Sparta would still have a ruler), beseeched the Ephors, the Spartan high priests, for a special permission to dispatch a unit to Thermopylae. Given the extraordinary circumstances, the Ephors granted him the right to take the King's Bodyguard, a unit of three hundred men, to war.

Leonidas was sure he was marching to his death, since the renowned oracle at Delphi had predicted that Sparta must mourn a king in order to achieve victory. According to ancient accounts, the oracle foretold:

> "For you, inhabitants of wide-wayed Sparta,
> Either your great and glorious city must be wasted by Persian men,
> Or if not that, then the bound of Lacedaemon must mourn a dead king, from Heracles' line.
> The might of bulls or lions will not restrain him with opposing strength; for he has the might of Zeus.
> I declare that he will not be restrained until he utterly tears apart one of these."

Seeking to fulfill the prophecy, Leonidas personally picked 300, all of which had living sons so their bloodlines would not be extinguished. According to Plutarch, when Leonidas was asked upon his departure by his wife Gorgo, Queen of Sparta, what she should do in his absence, he replied, "Marry a good man and bear good children."

Statue of Leonidas

The Spartans were willingly creating a suicide unit, but to the men who joined Leonidas it was undoubtedly a high honor to be selected. The ancient Roman historian Plutarch captured the essence of the Spartans' thinking and culture in recounting a story about one of the men who was not chosen, "When Paedaretus was not chosen to be one of the Three Hundred, an honor which ranked highest in the State, he departed cheerful and smiling, with the remark that he was glad if the State possessed three hundred citizens who were better than himself."

Thus, in the summer of 480 BCE, Leonidas and his men marched towards Thermopylae. Alongside the vaunted 300 Spartans were a further 600 of the *perioikoi*, the Spartan “peers”, which enjoyed similar rights to full-blooded Spartan citizens, and an equal number of helot servants and light infantrymen, for a total of 1,500. The Spartans were quickly joined along the march by another 3,000 hoplites from Corinth, Arcadia, Mantinea, Tegea and Mycenae, and more troops joined them as they progressed out of the Peloponnese and into Northern Greece. The Thespians sent 700 hoplites, the Thebans 400, and when the allied army reached Thermopylae the Phokians and Locrians, who inhabited the lands directly to the south of the pass, sent all 2,000 men they had, according to Herodotus. Thus, to bolster Leonidas’ ranks, the Greeks either had around 6,000 men according to Herodotus or 7,500 according to ancient historian Diodorus Sicilus. Whatever the actual number, the Greeks were facing what even modern historians have estimated as being upwards of half a million men. Based on modern estimates, at best the Greeks were facing odds of 20-1, but it’s more likely there were 50-80 Persians for every Greek.

Obviously the Greeks heading toward Thermopylae knew they were going to be outnumbered by an astounding amount ahead of time, so they were obviously determined to stand and fight there no matter how many men Xerxes had. As Plutarch so aptly put it, "The Spartans used to ask about the enemy, it was not important how many there are, but where the enemy was." But the Greeks weren’t heading to Thermopylae simply to die a glorious death; they chose it because it was the best defensive ground.

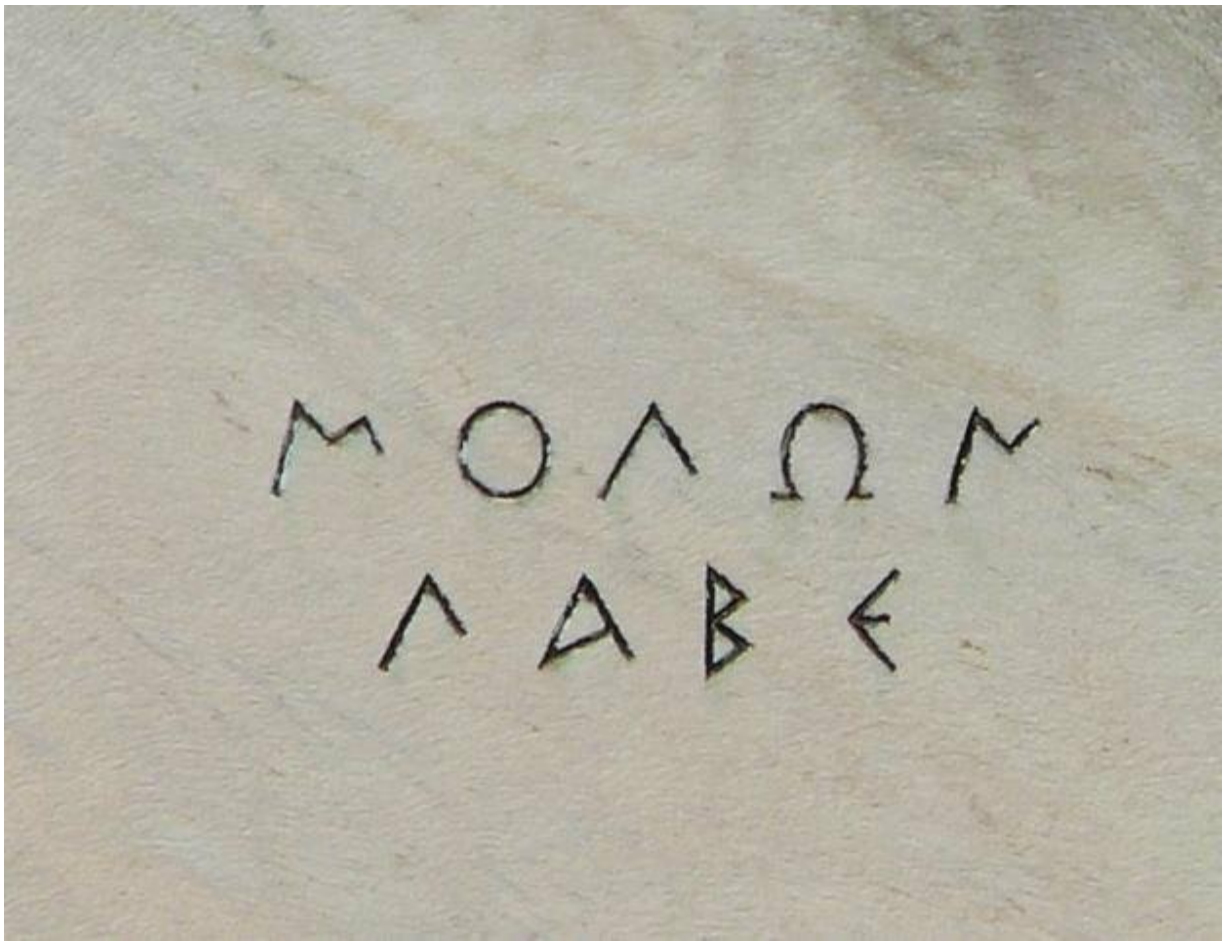
To bolster their defense, the Greeks planned to occupy the narrowest point of the pass at Thermopylae, what was known as the “Middle Gate”. At that spot, there still stood the ruins of an ancient wall built by the Phokians, which would help the defense of the pass. Some of the Peloponnesian allies, once they had surveyed the site, offered the opinion that they should abandon Phokis and Locris to their fate and fall back to the isthmus of Corinth, where it would be easier to summon reinforcement, but Leonidas was adamant that they must make their stand at Thermopylae, or not at all, not least because he had 2,000 Phokian and Locrian soldiers at his orders now. But Leonidas’ considerations were tactical as well as political. Simply put, Thermopylae, “The Hot Gates” in Greek (named from the hot springs that made it a sought-

after spa location for travellers from all across Greece), was the best possible place for a numerically inferior enemy to contest Xerxes' passage. Though the geography of the pass has changed considerably over the millennia, in ancient times it consisted of a track running at the bottom of a defile about 100 yards across, snaking its way along the coast. To one side of the path, the land fell away sheer to the rocky coast below, while to the other the pass was hemmed in by impassable cliffs. There was a single mountain path which could allow a small force to bypass Thermopylae, a fact which the Greeks knew but the Persians did not. Accordingly, Leonidas dispatched a thousand of his men to guard the path, while he arrayed the rest of his troops defensively across the narrow aperture known as the Middle Gate (there were three such tightenings of the pass all told) with the hastily reinforced Phokian wall as a fallback defensive position. In the narrow pass, Xerxes' massive advantage in numbers would be nullified. Now all Leonidas and his men could do was wait.

Some time after Leonidas, his Spartans and their allies had set up their defensive position at Thermopylae, and with the allied fleet standing to off Artemisium, Xerxes' army finally arrived. In August of 480 B.C., the Spartan scouts (possibly the *Skiritai*, the celebrated Spartan light infantry, who always fought on the extreme left of the Spartan battle-line, directly opposite the enemy elite troops) spotted a great horde of armed men moving on the far side of the Malian Gulf. Tens, then hundreds of thousands of armed men, followed by an equal or even greater number of slaves and camp followers, and more bullocks, horses, camels and assorted cattle than the assembled Greeks had ever seen in their lives.

Xerxes' horde was big enough to blacken the ground from horizon to horizon, and all that stood between it and Greece were six, perhaps seven thousand hoplites. Yet, remarkably, or perhaps as a testament for the respect he had for Greek heavy infantry, Xerxes did not attack at once. Instead, he chose to talk. He dispatched an envoy to the Leonidas and the Greeks, asking them to stand down and grant him passage, and promising that the Spartans themselves would receive untold honors if they would but submit. The Greeks, Xerxes' envoy argued, would still be free; inclusion in the Persian Empire would mean riches and privilege for all. Leonidas, however, did not see things quite that way. Capitulation, he and the Greek allied generals

argued, was tantamount to slavery. At Leonidas' stubborn refusal to see sense, Xerxes' envoy grew irate and insisted the Spartans and their allies lay down their weapons. According to Plutarch, Leonidas replied with the famous phrase "molòn labé", "Come and take them."



The words molòn labé inscribed on the marble of the Leonidas Monument at Thermopylae. Today this is the motto of the Greek 1st Army Corps.

Five days passed while the Greeks waited and Xerxes determined what was to be done. His navy could not hope to force the passage at the straits of Artemisium without suffering extremely heavy casualties, and might well be turned back altogether. Likewise, outflanking the small Greek force at Thermopylae appeared impossible. The Persians would have no choice, then, except to make a fight of it. On the morning of the fifth day after the Persian army's arrival, Xerxes gave his orders. 5,000 archers moved forward into position towards the Greek encampment at the Phokian wall. The battle of

Thermopylae had begun.

With the Spartans in the vanguard, Leonidas ordered the Greeks to take up the phalanx formation across the pass and arrayed them before the wall as the Persian archers advanced to within a hundred yards of the Greeks. From there, the Persians unleashed a colossal volley of arrows against them. Like all good archers, it is likely that at that range the Persians could shoot three volleys while their first arrow was still in the air, and the Greeks soon found themselves under a veritable hail of darts. However, to the Persians' great consternation, the Greeks literally shrugged them off. The light Persian bows were a far cry from the longbows or compound bows of the English and Mongols, which could punch through armor at three hundred yards, and the Greeks' thick bronze shields, helmets and armor completely protected them from the storm of arrows, which the ancient historians claimed caused only a few light flesh-wounds. Shaken, Xerxes ordered his archers to fall back and sent in his hammer-blow: ten thousand of his best infantry, natives of the Persian heartland of Media and Cissia, which included among their officers a number of Xerxes' own relatives, scions of the royal family. It was time for the Spartans to prove why they were the best heavy infantry in the world.

Like a wave, the Medes and Cissians swept forward towards the Greek positions, where the Spartans, *Periokoi*, and other Peloponnesians had taken up their place in the van with Leonidas, who was in his 60th year and thus considerably older than he has historically been portrayed. Nevertheless, like a wave hitting a cliff, as the Persians smashed against the Greek phalanx they broke. The Persians had just encountered the famous "Wall of Bronze", and these initial attackers were powerless against it. Their courage and valor could not be disputed, but their training and equipment were completely inadequate to the task. The Persians had shorter spears, making it hard for them to even reach the Greek phalanx before getting speared themselves. And even if they did make contact, the lighter shields and shorter spears and swords of the Persians prevented them from effectively engaging the Greek hoplites. Their light spears shivered against the great bronze-fronted shields and thick armor of the hoplites, their sabers and short swords cut ineffectually at the crested helmets and bronze-wrapped shins, and their own light armor and wicker shields could do nothing to prevent the heavy Greek spears from punching through them like paper, splitting the men wielding them.

Despite their advantage in numbers and the great number of men they poured into the pass, try as they might the Persians could make no headway against the Greek forces. Indeed, they soon found themselves on the receiving end of what the hoplites had spent countless soul-numbing hours practicing: *Othismos.* This was the “mass shove” of the hoplite phalanx, which began pushing the Persians in their front backwards and chewing up their line like a meat-grinder. Thousands of the Medes and Cissians were cut down, while still more were crushed to death by the press of men or were literally hurled off the cliffs to drown or smash into the rocks below. According to Herodotus, this was achieved at the cost of only a few Spartan dead. The carnage was so catastrophic for the Persians that Xerxes, who was watching the battle from the heights above, leapt up from his chair three times in mortal anguish for his men, who were being cut to pieces in the defile below. The Greek historian Ctesias wrote that the Persians’ first wave was "cut to ribbons", yet only only two or three Spartans were dead.

Fighting in the phalanx, even for trained warriors, was incredibly taxing physically. The need to be constantly reactive, often at a split second’s notice, in order to block a thrust or slash or strike back in turn, coupled with wearing over 60 pounds of armor and constantly shoving against a solid-packed mass of men was so exhausting that it could only be endured for a handful of minutes at a time, even by the Spartans. Because of this, the Greek troops rotated their units (generally divided by city of origin) in and out of the battle-line to ensure a constant supply of fresh hoplites to the meat-grinder of the phalanx. According to Herodotus, this was also an indication that the Greeks had sufficient numbers to block the entire pass. The Greek soldiers were so exhausted from fighting that, as soon as they were relieved, they dropped to the ground as though dead, while the helots rushed to assist them. The ground, which had been hard-packed and parched in summer, was churned with blood.

In the early afternoon, a lull fell on the battlefield as the Persian forces pulled back, which allowed the Greeks a chance to catch their breath and tend to the small wounds which, despite their armor, were a natural consequence of fighting in the Phalanx. Given that fighting in the phalanx formation consisted largely of a confused shoving brawl where weapons burst into fragments of wood and iron and people lunged with knives, swords, spears

and axes, it’s quite likely that a significant number of wounds would be the result of “friendly fire” by overly enthusiastic fellow hoplites. And though they reportedly suffered few casualties in the first wave of fighting, the Greeks were impressed by the bravery of the Persians, who despite being decidedly outmatched had continued to hurl themselves at the phalanx, even tearing with their own bare hands at the weapons and shields of the enemy in an attempt to disarm them so that their comrades might get a spear-thrust in.

The Medes and Cissians had acquitted themselves nobly if futilely, and they had been bloodily repulsed, but Xerxes was far from done. The Spartans and their allies had barely dented his great horde, and now he dispatched the hammer-blow that he assumed would fell them in earnest. Against troops already bone-weary from the morning’s battle, he sent in his famed 10,000 man crack unit, the Immortals. Unlike the Medes and Cissians, the Immortals advanced into battle in tomb-like, utter silence (as the Spartans did themselves), in a deliberate attempt to avoid battle-frenzy and instill fear into the waiting enemy. The Greek hoplites rose to their feet, shouldered their shields, and took up their positions in the phalanx. The Persians were coming again.

Depiction of the Immortals in the Palace of Darius I

The Persians' elite corps remains the subject of much intrigue, including over the origins of their name. It was Herodotus who referred to the force as the "Immortals", claiming that the name referred to the fact that the force was always 10,000 strong, and that there was thus always a new member to replace a wounded or dead one. Though there is evidence from Persia that the unit did exist, no name was attached to them, and modern historians believe that Herodotus and/or his source mistook the name Anûšiya ("companions") with Anauša ('Immortals')."

Herodotus wrote in his *Histories* of all the extra perks the Immortals received, including concubines and food designated only for them, but they were about to receive the same treatment from the Greeks that their counterparts had received earlier. Xerxes may very well have hoped or even assumed that his vaunted Immortals would make short shrift of the tired Greeks, especially because it was not even the Spartans but one of the allied contingents who first rose to take their place in the battle-line against them. However, once again the superior training and armament of the hoplites proved decisive. Though slightly more heavily armored than their Mede and Cissian counterparts, the Immortals were no match for the phalanx, who suckered the Immortals deeper into the pass by feigning a retreat and tempting the Persians to chase after them. Once again, Xerxes was forced to watch in horror as his vaunted infantry was cut to ribbons in the pass.

At last, as darkness fell, the decimated Immortals fell back, yielding the field of battle to the Greeks, who were so tired that many of them needed their comrades to physically force food and water into their mouths because they were incapable of taking sustenance themselves.

Though the night passed without incident, the dawn of the second day of the battle brought no respite for the Greeks. Though his elite shock troops had failed, Xerxes still had tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of completely fresh troops to throw at the Hot Gates. Counting on the fact that the Spartans and their allies would be exhausted and/or injured by wounds, and incapable of putting up a spirited resistance, Xerxes launched an all-out assault against the Phokian wall.

Yet again, Xerxes could not have been more wrong. Driven to extremes of valor and endurance by a desire to match up to the notorious Spartans, the allied Greeks performed like prodigies on the second day, and once again the phalanx proved to be a bulwark that could take any amount of enemy damage, shrugging off the Persian attacks without faltering. Now, however, fatigue began to tell in earnest, and as the Greeks became more sluggish, the number of casualties began to rise. Dozens were killed, and many more wounded, including a significant number of Spartans. Despite their casualties and exhaustion, however, the Greeks managed to push back the advancing Persians once more and, towards midday, Xerxes' men fell back to their encampment, now by all accounts terrified by the apparent utter invincibility of their foes.

It was at this crucial moment, when Xerxes was pondering if even attrition could destroy the Spartans and their allies, that he received what amounted to a gift from the gods. A native of Thracis named Ephialtes deserted to his side and revealed to his generals that there existed a remote mountain path, through which the Persians could march to the rear of Thermopylae. This would allow the Persians to envelop the defending Greek forces and destroy them. Ephialtes' name would later become so reviled as a traitor that his name virtually disappears from Greek histories altogether, indicating the shame associated with it. Even in modern Greece, the name Ephialtes is synonymous with traitor, and his name has become the word for "nightmare" in modern Greek.

According to Herodotus, two other men were accused of betraying the hidden trail to the Persians: Onetas, a native of Carystus and son of Phanagoras; and Corydallus, a native of Anticyra. However, Herodotus was certain that it was actually Ephialtes because, as he wrote, "the deputies of the Greeks, the Pylagorae, who must have had the best means for ascertaining the truth, did not offer the reward on the heads of Onetas and Corydallus, but for that of Ephialtes of Trachis."

Whatever the case, Xerxes no longer needed to force his way past the hoplites guarding the Hot Gates. Now he could simply outflank them and appear in both their front and rear. At dawn of the third day of the battle, General Mardonius, at the head of 10,000 Immortals (whose numbers were

immediately filled by selecting eligible recruits from other units) and a further 10,000 Persian troops, moved up the path that Ephialtes had revealed, surprising the 1,000 Phokian hoplites who were guarding it. Faced with overwhelming odds and without a similarly effective defensive position to protect, the Phokians fell back to a hilltop nearby, where they planned to make a final stand, but the Persians contented themselves with keeping them at a distance with volleys of arrows while the main force proceeded at the double down the path.

A Phokian runner raced ahead of them, bearing the grave news to Leonidas; in a few hours at most, his troops would be encircled. Staring calamity in the face, Leonidas convened a council of war with his surviving generals. Despite their previous successes, all the Greeks knew that staying to fight meant death. Accordingly, many of the generals leading the Greek contingents chose retreat as the only viable option, but not Leonidas. With the weight of prophecy, Spartan military tradition, and simple common tactical sense on his shoulders, he bade the other Greek contingents disperse, but he and his Spartans were determined to stand and die. According to Plutarch, Leonidas exhorted his men, “Eat well, for tonight we dine in Hades.”

The reason for Leonidas’ decision is simple, and it has less to do with bombast and the will of the gods than it does with a desire not to see his entire command annihilated. By fighting a rearguard action, he could ensure that the slow-moving hoplites would be able to escape before Xerxes’ cavalry, unleashed on the vast plains behind Thermopylae, could run them down and cut them to pieces. Thus, those who would stay behind to fight were doing so in an effort to save those who fled.

Whether it was because so many other Greeks were just as brave as the Spartans or because they realized the tactical situation, what was left of the 700 Thespians refused to leave even when ordered to do so, as did 400 Thebans. The helots who had accompanied the Spartans into battle also refused to retreat. Thus, while the majority of the Greek forces departed the battlefield, a mixed unit of around 1,700 men stayed back to defend the pass against Xerxes and the Persians.

As daylight washed across the battlefield, Xerxes made his customary

morning sacrifices and, having established that the Immortals were now advancing towards the rear of what remained of the Greek forces, ordered a fresh wave of ten thousand infantry to advance against the Phokian wall.

This time, however, the Greeks did not remain on the defensive. Rather, in a last, desperate, glorious attempt to take as many of the enemy with them as they could, they advanced into the wider part of the path, meeting the Persians where every Greek spear and sword could be brought to bear. The struggle was brutal and vicious, and despite the odds it lasted for hours as the Greeks inflicted carnage upon the Persian forces but began to be slowly whittled down. According to Herodotus, when all their spears were shattered, and even their buttspikes had been smashed to kindling, the Greeks fought on with swords, daggers and captured Persian weapons, continuing a desperate melee where all form of fighting order broke down completely.

At the height of this fighting, Leonidas himself was killed, feathered with shafts by Persian archers, and a massive running fight broke out between the Greeks, desperate to keep his body in their possession, and the Persians who sought to despoil it. It was at this point, when the fighting was at its most bitter, that two of Xerxes' own brothers were killed, but both sides could not sustain a massacre of such ferocity for long. Greeks and Persians alike fell back to draw breath and, with the Immortals now approaching from their rear, the remnants of the Greek force dragged their dead and wounded back to a hill not far behind the Phokian wall to make one final stand.

It was at this point that Herodotus claims the Thebans had a change of heart. Historians have largely assumed the Thebans were brought as hostages to Thermopylae, as Herodotus himself suggested, which makes it unclear why the departing Greeks didn't take the hostages back with them. Some historians speculate the Thebans that remained were loyal to the Greek cause, but here Herodotus seems to dispel that notion in writing that they "moved away from their companions, and with hands upraised, advanced toward the barbarians..." Shouting that they surrendered, they advanced towards the Persians, casting their weapons aside. Many were cut down either out of vengeance or because the Persians suspected a trick, but eventually the rest were seized and borne away in chains.

The final act of the drama was about to unfold. The Persians swept in

against the beleaguered Greeks who stood, back to back, atop the knoll they had chosen to die on. Their armor was in pieces, their shields stove in or long gone, and their weapons were little more than sticks and blunted, twisted pieces of metal. Herodotus described the final scene, “Here they defended themselves to the last, those who still had swords using them, and the others resisting with their hands and teeth." Finally, furious at the losses he had suffered, Xerxes ordered his men to fall back and, with his archers standing in at a distance, had the remaining Greeks slaughtered with a hail of arrows.

With the desperate fighting finally over, the Greeks had lost between two and three thousand men, but they had succeeded in holding the pass for three days and inflicted several times their number of casualties. It was a defeat, obviously, but one that had the flavor of victory. In fact, Thermopylae so enraged Xerxes that he ignored Persian customs honoring valiant enemy warriors and had Leonidas’ corpse beheaded and crucified. Though the Greeks who had stayed behind to contest the passage of Xerxes’ troops had perished to the last man, their sacrifice would echo throughout Greece, an inspiration for the men preparing for the battles yet to come, when the fate of all the Hellenic world would be decided.

Thermopylae had been the gates of Greece, and after the battle Xerxes advanced with both his army and navy into the heart of his enemies’ territory. Greece’s allied fleet retreated from its blockading position at Artemisium towards Salamis, where they helped ferry the Athenians away from their city and onto the island not far from the shore. Meanwhile, the Persian army advanced into the interior, putting Boeotia (including Thespiae) to the torch before marching on Athens itself. Finding the city deserted by almost all of its citizens, Xerxes vented his spite upon the Greeks and took revenge for his father’s defeat at Marathon by putting the entire city to the torch, forcing the Athenian citizens to watch as their city was turned to rubble.

In the aftermath of the campaign, a stone lion was erected on the site of the last stand of Leonidas’ men at Thermopylae, and most of the bodies were interred there, Spartan, Helot and Allied (although Leonidas’ bones were eventually returned to Sparta). Over them was laid a plaque bearing the epitaph written by the celebrated poet Simonides, one that has since spawned countless variations like, “Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here,

according to their laws, we lie".

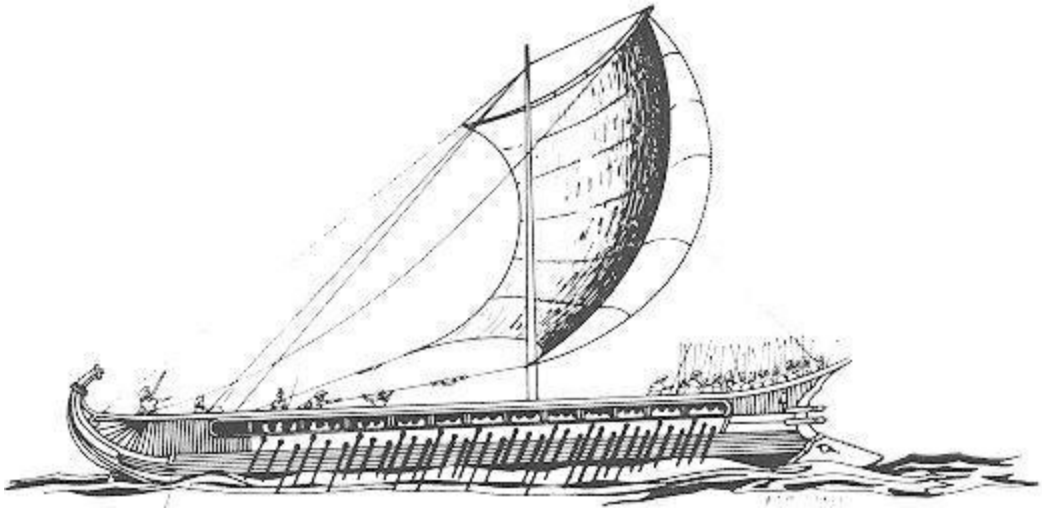
Ancient Athens is remembered militarily for its prowess on the sea, but if not for some fortuitous circumstances, the Athenians would never have become a maritime power and the Persians may have won the Battle of Salamis. In 483 BE, while the Persian army was mustering in Sardis, a large deposit of silver was discovered about 25 miles south east of Athens in a place that would later be named Laurium (Hale 2009, 7). This serendipitous discovery by the Athenians proved to be a boon to their economy, but the city leaders came to an impasse over how to spend the money; most of the city leaders wanted to put the 600,000 drachmas of silver towards a dole fund, but Themistocles, the great hero of the Battle of Salamis, had other ideas (Hale 2009, 11). Themistocles argued that the silver surplus should be used to build a navy, which the Athenians in turn would use to fight the Greek city-state of Aegina. Herodotus explained, "Themistocles, however, persuaded them to give up this idea and, instead of distributing the money, to spend it on the construction of two hundred warships for use in the war with Aegina. The outbreak of this war at that moment saved Greece by forcing Athens to become a maritime power." (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 144).

Depiction of Themistocles

Herodotus' account is corroborated by the later historian and biographer Plutarch, who also gives more details concerning Themistocles' intelligence and personality. Plutarch wrote, "And so, in the first place, whereas the Athenians were wont to divide up among themselves the revenue coming from the silver mines at Laureium, he, and he alone, dared to come before the people with a motion that this division be given up, and that with these moneys triremes be constructed for the war against Aegina. This was the fiercest war then troubling Hellas, and the islanders controlled the sea, owing to the number of their ships. Wherefore all the more easily did Themistocles carry his point, not by trying to terrify the citizens with dreadful pictures of Darius or the Persians – these were too far away and inspired no very serious

fear of their coming, but by making opportune use of the bitter jealousy which they cherished toward Aegina in order to secure armament he desired. The result was that with these moneys they built a hundred triremes, with which they actually fought at Salamis against Xerxes." (Plutarch, Themistocles, IV, 1-2).

Themistocles' oratory skills, intelligence, and guile convinced the other Athenian leaders to go with his plan, which ultimately saved their city from the Persians, but he was also successful in convincing them of the type of navy they should build. Themistocles specified that the navy would be comprised of fast, light triremes, which were designed for ramming, not carrying large numbers of marines (Hale 2009, 20). In Themistocles' judgment, it was the Persian navy that was its Achilles heel, so a well-trained and equipped Athenian navy would be the only way to defeat Xerxes and his army. Despite defeating the Persian army on the plane of Marathon, the force that Xerxes was bringing with him south on land was so much larger that the Greeks had thought to find another way to defeat the Persians this time around. The Persian navy was also vast, but unlike its army, which had a solid core of Persian fighters, it was primarily made up of subject peoples who were forced to fight (Hale 2009, 34).



An illustration of a Greek trireme

Themistocles was able to build the Athenian navy through his silver tongue with the silver discovered in Attica, and he then used even more duplicitous methods to become the general of the Athenian fleet. According to Plutarch,

there were not many men who desired to lead the Athenians against the Persians, due in large measure to fears of Persian reprisals should Xerxes defeat the Greeks. However, fear did not stop all candidates, and Themistocles and an apparently corrupt man named Epicydes were finalists for the position until the former used his guile to displace the latter. Plutarch explained, “At last, when the Mede was descending upon Hellas and the Athenians were deliberating who should be their general, all the rest, they say, voluntarily renounced their claims to the generalship, so panic-stricken were they at the danger; but Epicydes, the son of Euphemides, a popular leader who was powerful in speech but effeminate in spirit and open to bribes, set out to get the office, and was likely to prevail in the election; so Themistocles, fearing lest matters should got to utter ruin in case the leadership fell to such a man, bribed and bought off the ambition of Epicydes.” (Plutarch, Themistocles, VI, 1).

With Themistocles firmly in the position as general, the Athenians had a capable leader who could defeat the Persian fleet. The Athenians also temporarily rescinded all ostracisms in 480 BCE, which allowed notable and wealthy citizens to return to defend their possessions. Athens later benefited from this policy at the Battle of Salamis since the formerly banished Aristides, the second most important Athenian at the battle, fought valiantly alongside his countrymen (Plutarch, Aristides, VIII, 1).

The Greeks then had two final acts of preparation to make before Xerxes and the Persian army arrived in Attica: they had to evacuate most of the Attic peninsula and consult their oracles. The ancient Greeks were a very religious people who saw the influence and actions of their gods in most events, great and small. Poseidon protected Greek mariners, Athena did the same to her eponymously named city, and Zeus sat on Mount Olympus presiding over all mortals and immortals alike. When the Greeks had important questions that pertained to worldly events and situations, they consulted oracles for answers, and the most important oracle in the Greek world was Apollo’s oracle in the city of Delphi (Parker 2001, 320). Thus, the Athenians approached the oracle and asked directly what course of action they should take against the approaching Persian army, and Herodotus recorded that the

oracle replied:

> “Why sit you, doomed ones? Fly to the world’s end, leaving
>
> Home and the heights your city circles like a wheel.
>
> The head shall not remain in its place, nor the body,
>
> Nor the feet beneath, nor the hands, nor the parts between;
>
> But all is ruined, for fire and the headlong god of war
>
> Spending in a Syrian chariot shall bring you low.
>
> May a tower shall he destroy, not your alone,
>
> And give to pitiless fire many shrines of gods,
>
> Which even now stand sweating, with fear quivering,
>
> While over the roof-tops black blood runs streaming
>
> In prophecy of woe that needs must come. But rise.
>
> Haste from the sanctuary and bow your hearts to grief.” (Herodotus, The Histories, VII. 140).

The oracle’s answer both upset and confused the Athenians, who then decided to approach the oracle a second time with olive branches in their hands as signs of their supplication (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 141). The second prophecy was still enigmatic, but it proved be the final statement on the matter. Herodotus wrote that this time, the oracle said:

> “Not wholly can Pallas win the heart of Olympian Zeus,
>
> Though she prays him with many prayers and all her subtlety;
>
> Yet will I speak to you this other word, as firm as adamant:
>
> Though all else shall be taken within the bound of Cercrops
>
> And the fastness of the holy mountain of Cithaeron,
>
> Yet Zeus the all-seeing grants to Athene’s prayer

That the wooden wall only shall not fall, but help you and your Children.

But await not the host of horse and foot coming from Asia,

Or be still, but turn your back and withdraw from the foe.

Truly a day will come when you will meet him face to face.

Divine Salamis, you will bring death to women's sons

When the corn is scattered, or the harvest gathered in." (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 141).

The second prophecy was a bit clearer, but a new question arose: what was the wooden wall? Determining what the oracle meant by the wooden wall immediately became a new source of debate amongst the Athenians, and while one party believed that it referred to the wooden palisade around the Acropolis in Athens, another faction believed it was in reference to the new Athenian fleet (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 142).

The Athenians, with their democratic nature, appeared to be at an impasse once more, and it would be bridged not by a priest or oracle but by Athens' supreme commander and orator, Themistocles. The Athenian commander had invested too much into the Athenian fleet to let it slip away through a misinterpreted prophecy, so he did what any far-sighted military commander would have done by interpreting the prophecy himself. Herodotus noted, " There was however, a man in Athens who had recently come into prominence – Themistocles called Neocles' son; he now came forward and declared that there was an important point in which the professional interpreters were mistaken. If, he maintained, the disaster referred to was to strike the Athenians, it would not have been expressed in such mild language. 'Hateful Salamis' would surely have been a more likely phrase than 'divine Salamis', if the inhabitants of the country were doomed to destruction there. On the contrary, the true interpretation was that the oracle referred not the Athenians but to their enemies. The 'wooden wall' did, indeed, mean ships; so he advised his countrymen to prepare at once to meet the invader at sea." (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 143).

Themistocles' charm, charisma, and oratorical skills prevailed once more as the Athenians decided to evacuate Athens and Attica and to make their stand on the sea in the narrow channel between the Attic peninsula and the island of Salamis, but before the Greeks would make their retreat further south to the island of Salamis and even further to the Peloponnesian peninsula, they had to form a formal alliance. Thus, as Xerxes and the Persian army was rampaging its way south through the kingdoms of Thrace and Macedon, a number of Greek city-states held a conference and formed the Hellenic League, with Sparta playing the role of military leader (Herodotus, The Histories, VII, 145). Once the Athenians had chosen a leader, built a navy, and recruited allies, it was time for them to put their plan into motion.

With the Persians marching south, the Greeks decided that they would meet Xerxes and his forces in order to give their people more time to evacuate Attica. After the meeting at Corinth, a force of 10,000 allied Greek troops, under the command of the Spartans, was sent to blockade the pass of Tempe in Thessaly, only to discover that Xerxes had stolen a march on them. Despite the first failure, the Persians had actually accomplished the unthinkable and physically bridged the Hellespont in 480 BCE, thereby crossing into northern Greece to the south of the hoplites waiting at Tempe. There was now only one way to stop Xerxes; to cross into Greece proper, the Persians would be forced to travel through the narrow defile of the mountain pass at Thermopylae, a site which had already seen its fair share of battle due to its strategic nature. If the Greeks could hold Xerxes off at Thermopylae, and concurrently if the allied fleet could stop the Persian navy at Artemisium to prevent a bypass, then the invasion of Greece could be defeated.

Thermopylae was clearly an important battle in the Greco-Persian Wars, but a naval engagement between the Persian and Athenian fleets that took place at the same time near the city of Artemisium had an even greater impact on the Battle of Salamis. Herodotus' account states that the Greeks were vastly outnumbered by the Persian fleet, but that the battle was a draw (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 8-200). Plutarch's account reveals more details, particularly how the Greeks used their experiences at Artemisium at the subsequent Battle of Salamis. He wrote, "The battles which were fought at that time with the ships of the Barbarians in the narrows were not decisive of the main issue, it is true, but they were of the greatest service to

the Hellenes in giving them experience, since they were thus taught by actual achievements in the face of danger that neither multitudes of ships." (Plutarch, Themistocles, VIII, 1).

Plutarch's passage reveals two important aspects of naval warfare that the Athenians learned at Artemisium and would later use at Salamis. First, the Athenians, due to their inferior numbers, fought in the narrows against the Persian fleet, where the Persians' numerical superiority mattered less since only a limited number of ships could fight at one time in the bottleneck created by the narrows. Furthermore, the Greeks learned that they could stand in the face of a numerically superior enemy, and the confidence the Athenians gained from the Battle of Artemisium went a long way towards their victory at Salamis.

Despite the good showing of the Greek fleet at Artemisium, it only slowed the Persian advance temporarily and, if anything, provoked the wrath of Xerxes even more. When the Greek defense of Thermopylae failed, they fell back on their second defensive line, which spread across the Isthmus of Corinth on land, where the Peloponnesians (mainly Spartans) constructed a wall. The other end was at the Salamis strait (Hale 2009, 57). The Greeks yielded all land north of the line – essentially all of Attica – to Xerxes and the Persians.

Any Greeks who were unlucky enough to be caught north of the defensive line suffered greatly under the Persian army. Herodotus explained, "Along the valley of the Cephisus nothing was spared; Drymus, Charadra, Erochus, Tethronium, Amphicaea, Neon, Pedies, Trites, Elateia, Huampolis, Parapotamii – all these places were burnt to the ground, including Abae, where there was a temple of Apollo richly furnished with treasure and offerings of all kinds. There was an oracle there, as indeed there is today; the shrine belonging to it was plundered and burnt. A few Phocians were chased and caught near the mountains, and some women were raped successively by so many Persians that they died." (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 33).

Once the Persian army reached Panopes, it divided into two divisions; Xerxes led one division to Athens, while the other sacked the holy city of Delphi and its temple (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 34-5). When the Persians finally arrived in Athens, they found the city largely deserted except

for a small force left to defend the Acropolis. After a successful siege, Xerxes leveled the final insult towards the Athenians by ordering the destruction of the Acropolis and its temples. Herodotus wrote, “But in the end the Persians solved their problem: a way of access to the Acropolis was found – for it was prophesied that all Athenian territory upon the continent of Greece must be overrun by the Persians. There is a place in front of the Acropolis, behind the way up to the gates, where the ascent is so steep that no guard was set, because it was not thought possible that any man would be able to climb it; here, by the shrine of Cercrops’ daughter Aglaurus, some soldiers managed to scramble up the precipitous face of the cliff. . . Having left not one of them alive, they stripped the temple of its treasures and burnt everything on the Acropolis. Xerxes, now absolute master of Athens, dispatched a rider to Susa with news for Artabanus of his success.” (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 53-54).

As it turned out, the most crucial battle would take place not on land but on water. The Battle of Salamis was fought in a narrow channel (much like the Battle of Artemisium) that separates the Attic peninsula from the island of Salamis. Despite the name Salamis being attributed to the island in modern times, there is some ambiguity in the ancient sources as to whether the reference was to the island or a town (Hammond 1956, 37).

The most detailed ancient source concerning the physical description and history of Salamis was written by the 1st century CE Greek geographer Pausanias, who wrote, “Salamis lies over against Eleusis, and stretches as far as the territory of Megara. It is said that the first to give this name to the island was Cychreus, who called it after his mother Salamis the daughter of Asopus, and afterwards it was colonised by the Aeginetans with Telamon. Philaeus, the son of Eurysaces, the son of Ajax, is said to have handed the island over to the Athenians, having been made an Athenian by them. Many years afterwards the Athenians drove out all the Salaminians, having discovered that they had been guilty of treachery in the war with Cassander.” (Pausanias, Description of Greece, I, 35.1-2).

Obviously, since the battle was at sea, the exact positioning of the ships can only be implied from the historical sources, but two other notable landmarks from the Battle of Salamis can be located on land. Xerxes watched the entire

battle from a throne on land (which will be discussed more thoroughly) below Mount Aegaleos, so modern scholars place his exact position opposite the island of Salamis and above the temple known as the Heracleum, which was the narrowest part of the channel (Hammond 1956, 38). The island of Pysttalia, which was the site of the limited land fighting during the Battle of Salamis, lies at the mouth of the channel (Morkot 1996, 76) in front of the town of Salamis (Hammond 1956, 38).

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of the physical layout of the channel of Salamis is how so many triremes were able to fit into such a tightly confined area. The size of both fleets can be deduced by the accounts of Herodotus and Plutarch, along with Aeschylus' drama *The Persians*. In fact, Plutarch cites Aeschylus as his source for the size of the Persian fleet (Plutarch, Themistocles, XIV, 1), but he only gives the number of Attic (Athenian) ships in his account, which he placed at 180 (Plutarch, Themistocles, XIV, 1). Herodotus' account concurs, as he wrote that the Athenians numbered 180 triremes and accounted for half of the Greek fleet (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 44). The passage where Aeschylus noted the numbers of both fleets was a scene where a Persian messenger related the disaster of the battle to Xerxes' mother, Atossa. The scene states, "If number of ships might gain the fight, believe me, queen, the victory had been ours. The Greeks could tell but ten time thirty ships, with other ten, of most select equipment. Xerxes numbered a thousand ships, two hundred sail and seven of rapid wing beside." (Aeschylus The Persians, 312). Based on all three of the ancient accounts, the modern historian N.G.L. Hammond placed the total number of Persian vessels at 1,407 and the Greeks at 380, which included some Greek defectors from the Persian fleet who came over to join their countrymen after the Battle of Artemisium (Hammond 1956, 40).

Despite the discrepancy in numbers, many major battles have been won before the battle even started through supreme planning and strategy, and the Battle of Salamis was no different in this respect. One of the most vital aspects of any military strategy is determining where and when the battle will be fought; if a commander is able to pick the place and time to engage his enemy, then he already has two advantages in his favor. As the Persian fleet advanced towards Salamis and the Persian army neared the Greek wall across the Isthmus of Corinth, not all of the Greeks (especially the Spartans and

other Peloponnesians) were convinced that Salamis was an ideal location to engage the Persians, but Themistocles, the wise commander of the Athenians, knew that Greek victory depended on holding the channel near Salamis. Once again, he relied on his excellent oratory skills to convince his countrymen to make a stand. According to Herodotus, Themistocles said, “Now for my plan: it will bring, if you adopt it, the following advantages: first, we shall be fighting in narrow waters, and there, with our inferior numbers, we shall win, provided things go as we may reasonably expect. Fighting in a confined space favours us but the open sea favours the enemy. Secondly, Salamis, where we have put our women and children, will be preserved; and thirdly – for you the most important point of all – you will be fighting in defence of the Peloponnese by remaining here just as much as by withdrawing to the Isthmus – nor, if you have the sense to follow my advice, will you draw the Persian army to the Peloponnese. If we beat them at sea, as I expect we shall, they will not advance to attack you on the Isthmus, or come any further than Attica; they will retreat in disorder, and we shall gain by the preservation of Megara, Aegina, and Salamis – where an oracle has already foretold our victory.” (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 60).

Not only is Themistocles’ intelligence and knowledge of military strategy related in this passage but also a deep understanding of the Greek psyche. After the Battle of Artemisium, Themistocles knew what his fleet was capable of and what it needed to do to win at Salamis; fighting in a narrow channel benefited the numerically inferior Greek fleet as it prevented the Persian fleet from maneuvering a diekplous and surrounding them. The Athenian general also appealed to the Greeks’ emotional states by pointing out that the Persians would not stop until they were beaten, and that the oracle at Delphi predicted their wooden wall (of ships) would be the victors.

The Spartans and other Peloponnesians appear to have been placated by Themistocles’ speech, but the wily Athenian commander had one last machination planned that would go a long way toward Greek victory at Salamis. Themistocles realized that if the Greek army had no way to retreat, they would fight more fiercely. As the two fleets assembled and faced each other in the Salamis channel, Themistocles believed that many of the men, especially the Peloponnesians, might desert in order to go back and defend their homes, so to prevent this, Themistocles devised a plan that utilized a

combination of deception and guile. Herodotus explained, “At this point Themistocles, feeling that he would be outvoted by the Peloponnesians, slipped quietly away from the meeting and sent a man over in a boat to the Persian fleet, with instructions upon what to say when he got there. The man – Sicinnus – was one of Themistocles’ slaves and used to attend upon his sons . . . Following his instructions, then, Sicinnus made his way to the Persian commanders and said: ‘I am the bearer of a secret communication from the Athenian commander, who is a well-wisher to your king and hopes for a Persian victory. He has told me to report to you that the Greeks are afraid and are planning to slip away. Only prevent them from slipping through your fingers, and you have at this moment an opportunity of unparalleled success. They are at daggers drawn with each other, and will offer no opposition – on the contrary, you will see the pro-Persians amongst them fighting the rest.’” (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 75).

In the cover of darkness Themistocles had no way of knowing if his plan worked until his fellow Athenian (and occasional political rival) Aristides sailed quietly through the Persian fleet from the allied Greek state of Aegina. Despite the well documented conflicts between the two esteemed Athenians, Aristides offered to put aside all differences and defer to Themistocles. Plutarch wrote, “‘O Themistocles,’ he said, ‘if we are wise, we shall at last lay aside our vain and puerile contention, and begin a salutary and honourable rivalry with one another in emulous struggles to save Hellas, thou as commanding general, I as assistant counsellor, since at the very outset I learn that thou art the only one who has adopted the best policy, urging as thous dost to fight a decisive sea-fight here in the narrows as soon as may be.’” (Plutarch, Aristides, VIII, 3).

A statue depicting Aristides

This was actually a crucial point for the Greeks before the battle even began because Aristides, who would prove to be indispensable in the land battle, joined the Greek fleet and saw the virtue in Themistocles' trick, which was successful. Herodotus recounted that not only was Themistocles' plan successful (since the Persian fleet encircled the Greeks), he was also so supremely confident that he didn't care how the Greeks would react if they found out he was behind it: "'It was I who was responsible for this move of the enemy; for as our men would not fight here of their own free will, it was necessary to make them, whether they wanted to do so or not. But take them the good news yourself; if I tell them, they will think I have invented it and will not believe me. Please, then, go in and make the report yourself. If they believe you, well and good; if they do not, it's all the same; for if we are surrounded, as you say we are, escape is no longer possible.'" (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 80).

Themistocles' ploy proved to be effective since it ensured the Greeks were forced to fight to the last ship, but he also demonstrated his qualities as a commander by choosing when the battle commenced, and the ancient sources agree that when the Battle of Salamis took place was almost as important as where it was fought. According to Plutarch, Themistocles chose a time that benefited the sleek, low to the water Greek triremes: "Themistocles is thought to have divined the best time for fighting with no less success than the best place, inasmuch as he took care not to send his triremes bow on against the Barbarian vessels until the hour of the day had come which always brought the breeze fresh from the sea and a swell rolling through the strait. This breeze wrought no harm to the Hellenic ships, since they lay low in the water and were rather small; but for the Barbarian ships, with their towering sterns and lofty decks and sluggish movements in getting under way, it was fatal, since it smote them and slewed them round broadside to the Hellenes." (Plutarch, Themistocles, XIV, 1-2).

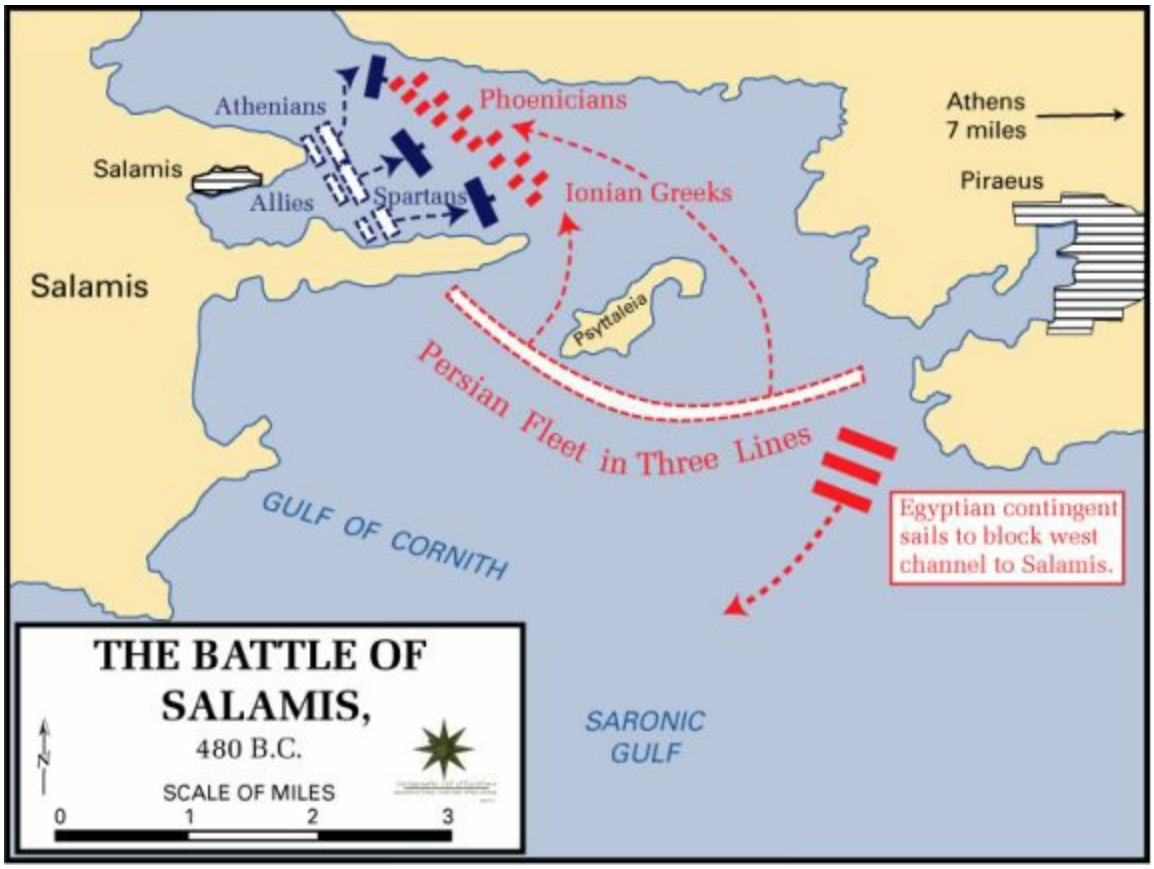
At dawn, before combat began, the leaders of both armies took their places. As mentioned above, Xerxes took a position of relative safety on the shore where he could observe the battle. According to Plutarch, "At break of day, Xerxes was seated on a high place and overlooking the disposition of his armament. This place was, according to Phanodemus, above the Heracleium, where only a narrow passage separates the island from Attica." (Plutarch, Themistocles, XIII, 1).

Xerxes stayed on his perch for the entire battle, never in danger, which stood in stark contrast to Themistocles, who took his place on a trireme amongst his men and roused them with his oratorical skills. Unfortunately, only a "compact version" (Zali 2013, 467) of the speech survives in Herodotus' account, and it is for the most part paraphrased. In the speech Themistocles used standard Greek rhetorical techniques (Zali 2013, 462) to exhort his men to demonstrate their better nature against their enemies, and despite the fact little of Themistocles's speech remains, it's easy to see how it fits into the overall picture of Greek victory at the Battle of Salamis. Themistocles – an expert at strategy and rhetoric – used all of his available skills to exhort the Greeks to fight fearlessly against overwhelming odds, and though the speech may not have been a decisive factor in the Greek victory at the Battle of Salamis, it was another plank in the "wooden wall" that the

oracle prophesized.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Battle of Salamis, at least in terms of military maneuvers, is that no ancient source mentions a diekplous or an attempt at a diekplous by either navy (Wallinga 1990, 148). Some modern historians believe that the Phoenician ships that were at the rear ranks of the Persian fleet were expected to prevent a Greek diekplous (Hale 2009, 64), but one cannot say for sure based on the silence of the ancient sources.

The Greek fleet was drawn up in a single line against the Salamis shore, and while a careful look at the sources reveals that although the word diekplous was never used to describe maneuvers at Salamis, it was clearly on Themistocles' mind. It's apparent that the Athenian commander chose the narrow channel near Salamis, which was similar in topography to Artemisium, to prevent a Persian diekplous. It's possible that since the Greeks were successful at preventing one, the ancient sources simply never describe one when recounting the battle, but either way, the narrows clearly prevented the Persian fleet from performing the maneuver. For their part, the Greeks did not have the numbers to perform one.



Map of the two navies' positions

The thin Greek line of triremes that faced the Persian fleet consisted of ships from Aegina on the right wing, Spartan ships in the middle, and the Athenian fleet on the left wing against the Phoenicians (Hale 2009, 65). As the Persian fleet moved forward to attack the Greeks, trumpets and war cries erupted from the Greek line. Aeschylus wrote, "Then the fierce trumpet's voice blazed o'er the main; and on the salt sea flood forthwith the oars, with measured plash, descended, and all their lines, with dexterous speed displayed, stood with opposing front. The right wing first, then the whole fleet bore down, and straight uprose a might shout. 'SONS OF THE GREEKS, ADVANCE! YOUR COUNTRY FREE, YOUR CHILDREN FREE, YOUR WIVES! THE ALTARS OF YOUR NATIVE GODS DELIVER, AND YOUR ANCESTRAL TOMBS – ALL'S NOW AT STAKE!'" (Aeschylus, The Persians, 313).

The Persians, who were perhaps overanxious and overaggressive due to their numerical superiority, moved toward the Greek line, but the line held

and even back rowed in a feigned retreat in order to face the Persian ships with their rams (Hale 2009, 67). The Persian fleet was then at a serious disadvantage despite their numbers, as their broadsides were exposed to the deadly Greek rams (Hale 2009, 47). This early engagement was written about by both Herodotus and Plutarch, but the details in their accounts differ slightly. Herodotus wrote, “The whole fleet now got under way, and in a moment the Persians were on them. The Greeks checked their way and began to back astern; and they were on the point of running aground when Ameinias of Pallene, in command of an Athenian ship, drove ahead and rammed an enemy vessel. Seeing the two ships foul of one another and locked together, the rest of the Greek fleet hurried to Ameinias’ assistance, and the general action began.” (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 84).

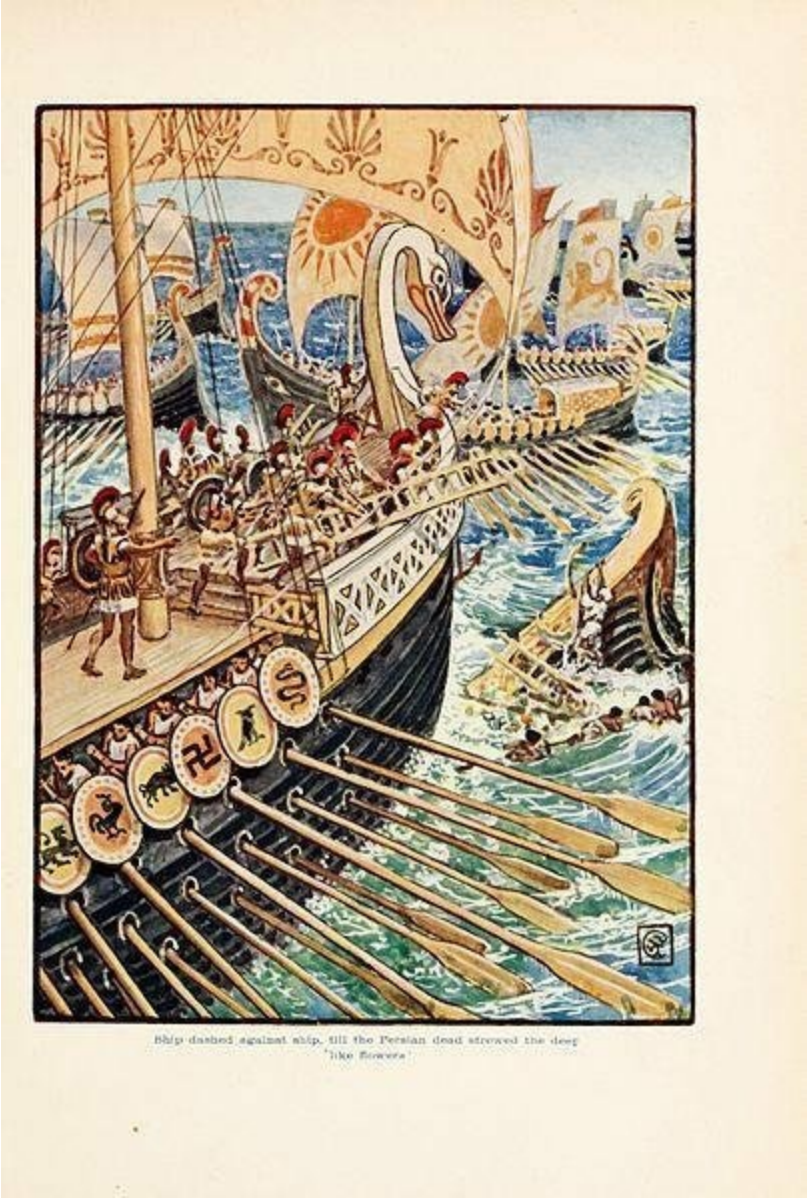
Plutarch’s account of the early fighting at the Battle of Salamis does not mention Ameinias, but it appears to be more revealing in terms of general strategy and maneuvers. Plutarch noted, “Now the first man to capture an enemy’s ship was Lycomedes, an Athenian captain, who cut off its figure-head and dedicated it to Apollo the Laurel-bearer at Phlya. Then the rest, put on an equality in numbers with their foes, because the Barbarians had to attack them by detachments in the narrow strait and so ran afoul of one another, routed them, though they resisted till the evening drew on.” (Plutarch, Themistocles, XV, 2).

Although Plutarch’s account is much more concise – in fact, his total account of the actual fighting is just this short passage – it is also more revealing in terms of the successful strategies employed by the Greeks. Again, the narrow strait/channel between Attica and Salamis played a crucial role in this battle as it proved to mitigate the Persians’ numerical superiority. By creating a bottleneck in the channel, the Greeks only had to fight the Persians as they came at them a few at a time, which also prevented the Persians from performing a diekplous maneuver.

It was not long after the initial fighting broke out that the battle moved into its second, crucial, phase. Due to frustration at not being able to encircle the Greek fleet, poor commanders, or a combination of both, the Persian fleet quickly demonstrated its lack of discipline and broke its line (Hale 2009, 69). Once the Persian line broke, the Battle of Salamis was decided as the only

individual ships in the Persian fleet that were a match for the Greeks, one on one, were helmed by the Phoenicians. As the Persian line broke and each ship was left to its own devices, the Greeks held strong and picked their individual battles wisely. Herodotus explained, “The Persian fleet suffered severely in the battle, the Athenians and Aeginetans accounting for a great many of their ships. Since the Greek fleet worked together as a whole, while the Persians had lost formation and were no longer fighting on any plan, that was what was bound to happen.” (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 86).

In ship to ship combat, the Persians were no match for the Greeks, who continued to use their rams to sink their enemy’s ships. In the few instances where the method of boarding and then fighting on the desk of ships was used, the Persians fared well because they carried many archers and javelin men and their ships were higher off the sea (Hammond 1956, 48), but such instances were the exception at Salamis.



Early 20th century depiction of the Greek ships ramming Persian ships

Throughout the day, the Greeks continued to decimate the Persians one at a time using the ramming technique, but one commander in the Persian fleet stood out for her use of guile and intelligence. Since the Persians were so severely defeated at Salamis, none of their commanders are remembered very well except one: Artemisia of Halicarnassus. Artemisia was the queen of the city-state of Halicarnassus (ironically also the hometown of Herodotus), which was a part of the Caria satrapy in the Achaemenid Empire. By all accounts, Artemisia was a loyal subject of the Persians and even volunteered to lead a contingent from her city to follow Xerxes in his campaign against

Greece in 480 BCE. Artemisia also fought against Themistocles and the Greeks at Artemisium, which is where she got her first taste of what the Persians were up against, but it was at Salamis where the queen became immortalized.

As fate would have it, Artemisia became famous for participating in a battle that she had advised the Persians against fighting. According to Herodotus, she said:

> "Tell the King to spare his ships and not do a naval battle because our enemies are much stronger than us in the sea, as men are to women. And why does he need to risk a naval battle? Athens for which he did undertake this expedition is his and the rest of Greece too. No man can stand against him and they who once resisted, were destroyed.
>
> If Xerxes chose not to rush into a naval encounter, but instead kept his ships close to the shore and either stayed there or moved them towards the Peloponnese, victory would be his. The Greeks can't hold out against him for very long. They will leave for their cities, because they don't have food in store on this island, as I have learned, and when our army will march against the Peloponnese they who have come from there will become worried and they will not stay here to fight to defend Athens.
>
> But if he hurries to engage I am afraid that the navy will be defeated and the land-forces will be weakened as well. In addition, he should also consider that he has certain untrustworthy allies, like the Egyptians, the Cyprians, the Kilikians and the Pamphylians, who are completely useless."

Interestingly, she gained her fame at the Battle of Salamis not through any excellent maneuvers or strategies but because of her cunning. After the Greeks broke the Persian line and it was everybody for themselves, Artemisia sprang into action. Herodotus explained, "I must however, mention Artemisia, on account of an exploit which still further increased her reputation with Xerxes . . . In this awkward situation she hit on a plan which turned out greatly to her advantage: with the Athenian close on her tail she

drove ahead with all possible speed and rammed one of her friends . . . For the captain of the Athenian trireme, on seeing her ram an enemy, naturally supposed that her ship was a Greek one, or else a deserter which was fighting on the Greek side; so he abandoned the chase and turned to attack elsewhere." (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 87).

As the Battle of Salamis progressed and it became apparent to Xerxes that his navy had lost, the Great King tried one last ditch effort to win the day. Although he did not participate directly in the Battle of Salamis he watched the entire event from his perch, and the few Persian commanders that fought well were duly noted by Xerxes. Herodotus wrote, "Xerxes watched the course of the battle from the base of Mt Aegaleos, across the strait from Salamis; whenever he saw one of his officers behaving with distinction, he would find out his name, and his secretaries wrote it down, together with his city and parentage." (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 90). Indeed, it was from his mountain throne that he watched and was so impressed by Artemisia that he told one of his advisors "my men have turned into women, my women into men" (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 88).

While watching with anger as the Greeks annihilated his navy, Xerxes realized that he still had one card left to play: his immense land army. If Xerxes could somehow land his army on the island of Salamis, where all of the Athenian evacuees were located, then he could force the Athenians to terms, but he had few ships left to transport his army after the Greek fleet routed them, so he planned to bridge the channel. The narrow channel, which was an advantage for the Greeks, nearly turned into a disadvantage when Xerxes sent men to build a causeway across it. Plutarch explained, "After the sea-fight, Xerxes, sill furious at his failure, undertook to carry moles out into the sea on which he could lead his infantry across to Salamis against the Hellenes, damming up the intervening strait. (Plutarch, Themistocles, XVI, 1)

As clever as Xerxes' plan to bridge the strait of Salamis was, it never materialized as the few ships he had left quickly fell victim to Greek mop-up efforts. When it became obvious that they were defeated, the remaining Persian ships tried to sail for their original base at Phalerum on the Attic peninsula, near the mouth of the Salamis channel. The ancient sources reveal

that few prisoners were taken, which suggests that among all the other strategies Themistocles planned, he told the Greeks to take no one alive. Thus, according to Herodotus, this phase of the battle was little more than a massacre: “When the Persian route began and they were trying to get back to Phalerum, the Aeginetan squadron, which was waiting to catch them in the narrows, did memorable service. The enemy was in hopeless confusion; such ships as offered resistance or tried to escape were cut to pieces by the Athenians, while the Aeginetans caught those which attempted to get clear, so that any ship which escaped the one enemy promptly fell amongst the other.” (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 91).

Herodotus’ account of the massacre of the Persian sailors by the Greeks can be corroborated by Aeschylus. The war veteran and dramatist wrote about the carnage from the perspective of a Persian: “Meanwhile the Greeks stroke after stroke dealt dexterous all around, till our ships showed their keels, and the blue sea was seen no more, with multitude of shops and corpses covered. All the shores were strewn, and the rough rocks, with dead; till, in the end, each ship in the barbaric host, that yet had oars, in most disordered flight rowed off. As men that fish for tunnies, so the Greeks, with broken booms, and fragments of the wreck, struck our snared men, and hacked them.” (Aeschylus, The Persians, 313).

This phase of the Battle of Salamis may be the most difficult for people today to comprehend since the killing of prisoners of war is now deemed a war crime, and there is no doubt Themistocles was aware of and probably ordered the killing of all captured and fleeing Persians. In fact, this move may have been well thought out by the Athenian commander; after all, although most of the women and children of Attica were safely evacuated to Salamis, the Athenians who fought in the Battle of Salamis still faced uncertainties when they returned home. Would their homes and field still be intact? Would their sacred temples and shrines still be there when they wanted to give offerings? These were unknown to the Greeks when the battle commenced, but they could probably assume that the Persians devastated Attica.

The massacre also dealt with a logistical problem for the Greeks, who had nowhere and no way of caring for hundreds if not thousands of prisoners. Thus, just like they did at the Battle of Marathon, they simply killed any

survivors.

While the Greeks were destroying the last of the Persian fleet, the last phase of the Battle of Salamis took place. As the day turned to night and Xerxes was trying to bridge the channel between Salamis and Attica, Persian transports ferried 400 of their elite soldiers to the island of Pysttaleia, and although somewhat peripheral to the eventual outcome of the Battle of Salamis, the island of Pysttaleia was important to both the Persians and Greeks and may have played a bigger role in the overall battle if the Persians would have been able to hold it. Pysttaleia is at the mouth of the channel of Salamis, which meant that if the Persians could have held the island, they may have been able to cross to Salamis and perhaps draw the Greeks onto land, where they would not have been so outclassed. At the same time, the island was important to the Greeks for spiritual reasons, as the Athenians believed it to be the sacred abode of the god Pan (Hale 2009, 63). The religious significance of the island should not be underestimated either, especially in the wake of the Persian destruction of so many Greek temples previously. After all, the Greeks had extra incentive to prevent them from defiling any more sacred spaces.

According to Plutarch, Aristides was the first Greek to notice Persians on Pysttaleia: “While the captains of the Hellenes were acting on this plan, Aristides noticed that Pysttaleia, a small island lying in the straits in front of Salamis, was full of the enemy. He therefore embarked in small boats the most ardent and the most warlike of the citizens, made a landing on Pysttaleia, joined battle with the Barbarians, and slew them all, save the few conspicuous men who were taken alive. Among these were three sons of the King’s sister Sandaucé, whom he straightway sent to Themistocles, and it is said that, in obedience to some oracle or other, and at the bidding of Euphrantides the seer, they were sacrificed to Dionysus Carnivorous. Then Aristides lined the islet all round with his hoplites, and lay in wait for any who should be cast up there, that no friend might perish, and no foe escape.” (Plutarch, Aristides, IX, 1-2).

With the fighting done, Herodotus wrote that there were not many Greek casualties, but he provided no numbers. He also wrote that the few Persians who survived the massacre drowned because they did not know how to swim

(Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 89). Among the multitude of Persians killed at the Battle of Salamis was Ariabinges, the son of Darius I and brother of Xerxes (Herodotus, The Histories, VIII, 89).

William Rainey's illustration depicting the death of Ariabinges

Meanwhile, having been massacred on both sea and land at Salamis, Xerxes and the Persian fleet quickly sailed back to Asia, but even still, the emperor had not abandoned his hopes for a conquest of Greece because the best of his army, under Mardonius, still remained in the field. However, the following year, in the summer of 479 BCE, the Persians faced a force of between 40,000 and 100,000 Greek infantry near the Boeotian city of Plataea.

At the battle, the Greeks completely annihilated Mardonius' force of between 100,000-300,000 men, and Mardonius himself was killed. Around the same time, what remained of the Persian fleet was destroyed off Mycale. The Persian invasion was over, and no Persian army would ever set foot on Greek soil again.

The victory at Salamis was obviously a proud moment for the Greeks, especially the Athenians, but the real rewards for Athens came in the succeeding years as the city became the pre-eminent force in the Greek world. Before the Persian Wars, Athens had no great traditions of philosophy, art, science, or historical writing, but after the Battle of Salamis, their culture began to flourish into what most moderns regard as the Golden Age of Athens (Hale 2009, xxv). The above opinion is not just confined to modern scholars; Plutarch also believed that it was Themistocles and his navy that brought Athens to greatness. He claimed, "But Themistocles did not, as Aristophanes, the comic poet says, 'knead the Pireus on to the city,' nay, he fastened the city of the Peraeus, and the land to the sea, And so it was that he increased the privileges of the common people as against the nobles, and filled them with boldness, since the controlling power came now into the hands of skippers and boastswins and pilots." (Plutarch, Themistocles, XIX, 3-4).

So it was that Themistocles and the Battle of Salamis transformed Athens. Previously a sleepy city-state that had just awoken from the nightmare of tyranny and was transitioning into early democracy, Athens subsequently became the world center of learning and culture. On the other hand, after the Battle of Salamis, Persia would begin its long decline.

A memorial commemorating the battle

Picture of a column dedicated to the Greek alliance to commemorate their victory in the war

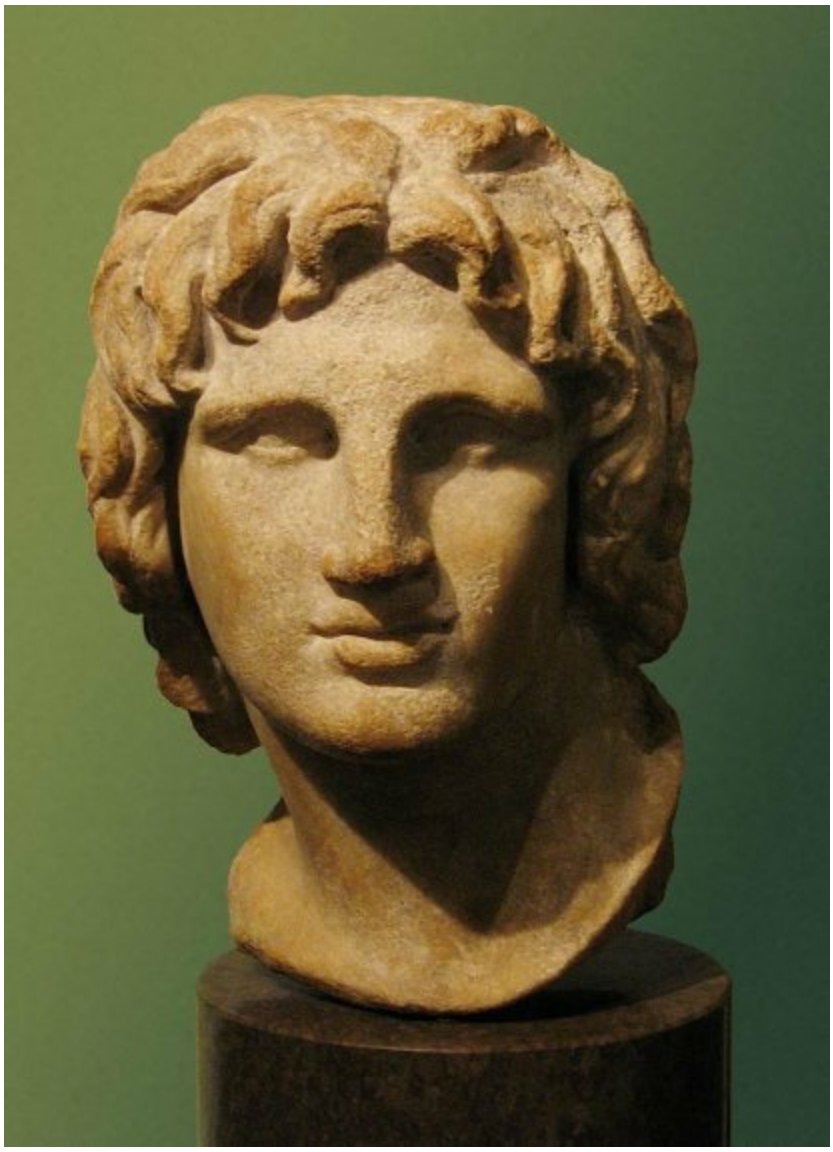
Alexander the Great

The royal inscriptions found at Persepolis reinforce this image of a benevolent rule; they declare that the king loved peace, not war, and that subject peoples were allowed to practice their beliefs and customs. But was this merely Persian propaganda? After all, these were bas-reliefs

commissioned by the king, and tablets written by his loyal – or fearful – servants.

In fact, there were plenty of people in the ancient world that despised everything the Persians stood for. The Persians themselves left little written history behind, so most of what is known about the empire and Persepolis has been gleaned from Greek accounts, but as the sworn enemies of the Persians, the Greeks liked to paint themselves as the creators of all things civilized and to portray the Persians as having been cruel, despotic, and backward. Inevitably, Western historians have identified better with the works of the Greco-Latin tradition, and thereby the importance of Persia in its historical setting has generally been downplayed.

Nevertheless, the Persians cannot be dismissed so easily. For 250 years they had ruled the largest empire the world had ever seen, even as the Greeks considered them an uncultured and warlike people. They liked to criticize the Persians for their perceived "softness,"[102] and one particularly pervasive trope was the portrayal of the Persians as barbarians. They viewed the Persians as a corrupting and effeminizing influence on all of the values that the Greeks stood for.[103] Alexander the Great warned his soldiers that "gluttony and opulence lead to much unmanliness. Those that eat such enormous meals are far too quickly beaten in battles."[104]



Andrew Dunn’s picture of a bust of Alexander the Great

Ultimately, it was Alexander the Great who was determined to end the corrupting influence of the Persians once and for all. In 334 BCE, he began a campaign that aimed to defeat the empire that had controlled most of the known world for the last few centuries.

At the first pitched battle between his army and that of the Persians, which took place at Issus in Turkey in 332 BCE, Alexander’s Macedonian army scored a resounding victory over the forces of King Darius III of Persia, despite being greatly outnumbered.[105] Much had to do with the superior military tactics that the Macedonians employed against the Persians, since the

latter were used to facing their foes in an open plain where their chariots could be best employed.[106]

This victory opened the road for Alexander's campaigns in Syria and Phoenicia, where he received the surrender of all major cities except the island city of Tyre, which only fell after a prolonged siege.[107] Over the next two years, Alexander's superior military tactics allowed him to take over lands that were once under Persian control, and in 331 BCE he reached the Persian heartland itself.

Alexander fully understood the importance of Persepolis as the symbolic heart of the Persian Empire.[108] By the time Alexander had reached Persepolis, the Persian armies had been completely routed, and the 12th and last Persian king, Darius III, was dead. Alexander entered the monumental city unopposed – sources state that there was no military guard there to defend the population.[109] The ceremonial center that had for almost two centuries embodied Persia's dominance of the world was finally in Greek hands.

The luxury and opulence surrounding them were anathema to Alexander, who told his soldiers that they were now in the "most hateful of cities."[110] In triumph, Alexander held a banquet for some of his troops on the terrace. According to the Greek accounts, it was here that the city's fate was sealed; Alexander decided to destroy anything that might risk becoming a source of opposition to him as he continued his campaigns, and Persepolis was obviously one such risk.[111] His soldiers thus burned and looted the city, and the conflagration spread across the ceremonial terrace into the surrounding suburbs.

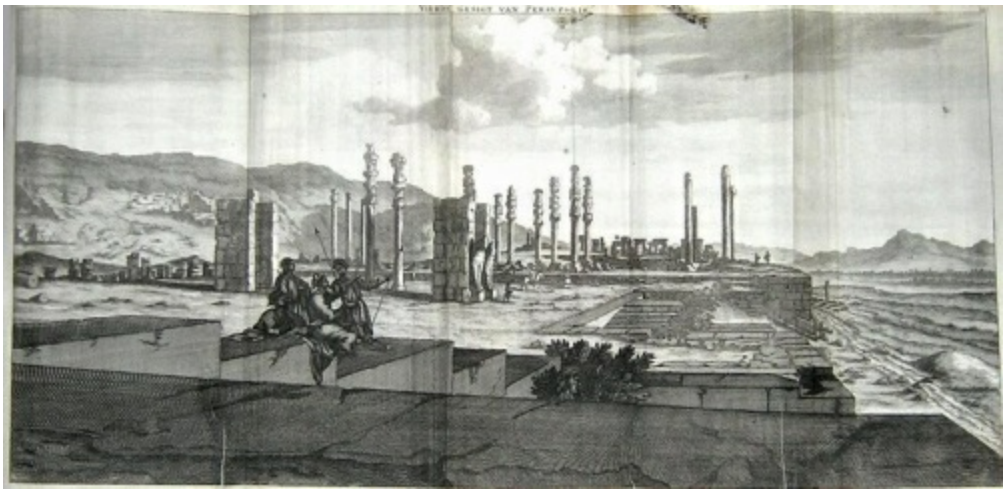
Once the city was burned down by Alexander's army, its remnants rapidly deteriorated and vanished. The Persian army was no longer strong enough to defend the empire, and the population had grown unhappy with the increasing levels of taxation they had suffered under the Persian kings. Alexander continued his campaigns to the east, bringing with him a Hellenistic culture that would dominate Central Asia for centuries.

Meanwhile, for the next several centuries, Persian cities lay neglected. With the original moat in Persepolis filled up, the rainwater flowing from the

adjacent mountain gradually destroyed most of the eastern fortifications, and the debris piled up in the palace area, partially burying it in sediment. As in Mesopotamia, the principle building material of the terrace's substructures was dried mud-brick, so it quickly degraded due to the forces of weathering. Some of the mud-brick structures managed to survive to the present day in part, but only to a low height.

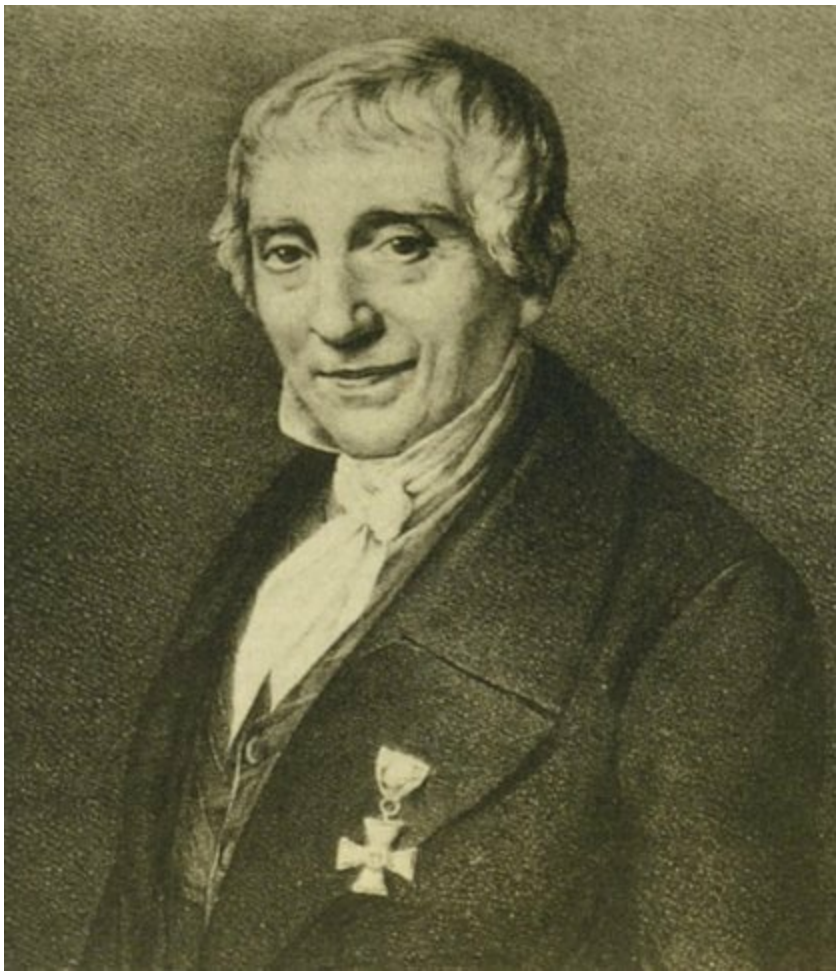
Conversely, the ashlar used for supporting elements, such as jambs and lintels of doorways, window-breastings, the bases of capitals, and sculptures, have easily survived the vicissitudes of time. Ironically, by burning down the city, Alexander helped preserve it, because many of the structures remained perfectly preserved beneath the ashes produced by the fire, protecting them from the elements.[112]

Early European visitors saw the ruined city of Persepolis pretty much as the troops of Alexander the Great had left it. The first reliable drawings of the ancient city were made by a Dutch scholar and artist, Cornelius de Bruijn, who visited Persepolis between 1704 and 1705.[113] He inscribed his name upon the door frame of the Gate of All Nations, setting a precedent that many later travelers followed from the 18th century onwards.[114] De Bruijn was followed by Eugène Flandin and Pascal Coste of France, who made extensive literary and artistic descriptions of what they saw there.[115] There were also innumerable amateur explorers and treasure hunters who left no academic records but plundered much from the site.[116]



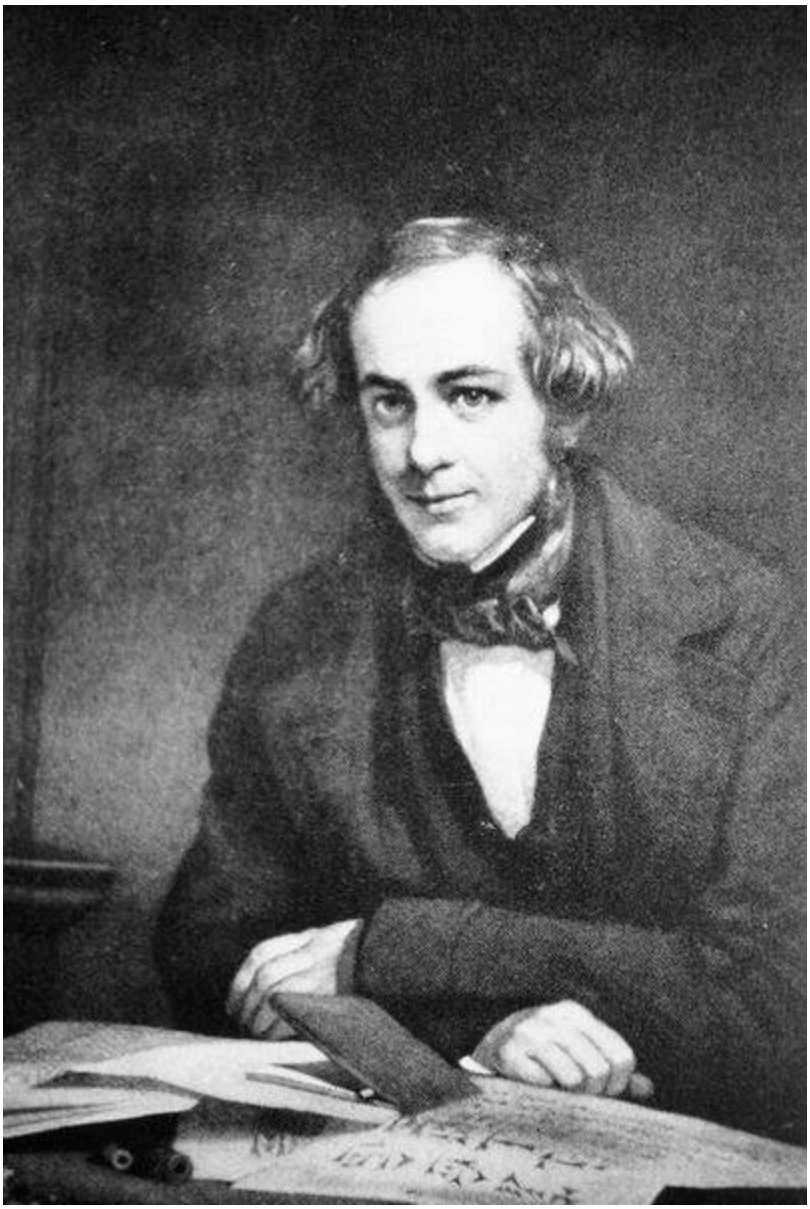
18th century sketches of the ruins of Persepolis

One of the things they saw among the exposed monuments of the ruined city were inscriptions in a then unknown script, using characters composed of small wedge-shaped elements. This is known today as cuneiform, and a short text transcribed from the buildings there was the basis for the first steps in the partial decipherment of the Old Persian language. This decipherment was done by Georg Friedrich Grotefend, a teacher at the University of Göttingen in the earliest years of the 19th century.[117] By doing so, he confirmed what many other scholars had guessed during the last century: the monuments at Persepolis belonged to the kings of the Achaemenid Dynasty, whose names they knew only from being handed down by Greek and Roman authors.



Grotefend

For decades, inscriptions on the tomb of Darius the Great were an intriguing puzzle for archaeologists. High up on the mountain of Behistun, perched atop a tall ladder, English army officer Sir Henry Rawlinson valiantly transcribed the text. That was the easy part; it then took him 10 long years to decipher it.[118]



Rawlinson

Thanks to the work of this great archaeologist, the puzzle was solved in 1835, and with that a whole new world opened up to scholars: the history of the Persians, told this time through their own words. The text was written in three different languages and in two different scripts: cuneiform and Aryan. Aryan was an alphabet created under the orders of King Darius I that consists of 36 characters representing syllables, and an additional 8 ideograms used for certain concepts (namely king, country, good, god, earth, Ahura Mazda). One language was that of the empire's rulers, now called Old Persian. The other two were languages that originated with the empire's subjects: Elamite,

which had been written and spoken in southwestern Iran long before Achaemenid rule, and Akkadian, the ancient language of the Babylonians and Assyrians.[119]

It was only in the 1930s that many of the wonders of Persepolis were finally uncovered through archaeological investigations. Persepolis was first extensively excavated by Ernst Herzfeld and Erich Schmidt of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and at the time, no one could dream of the regal splendors that their excavations would reveal to the world. Archaeologists found deep layers of burnt cedar, ebony, and teak wood while excavating the Apadana.[120] Whole staircases adorned with perfectly preserved bas-reliefs were seen for the very first time. In addition to the bas-reliefs, archaeologists found some artifacts that seemed less spectacular on first inspection but that would later prove vital in uncovering the secrets of the ancient Persians, such as the fragmented tablets.

The western wing of Xerxes' harem was reconstructed in the 1930s, designed by the German architect Professor Friedrich Krefter, and today serves as the headquarters of the Persepolis research foundation and museum. The structure is an almost perfect replication of what would have existed in the Achaemenid period, though it contains few of the objects that would have existed in the city during its Golden Age.[121] Persepolis had been plundered on many occasions throughout history, first by Alexander and then by many others. In addition, many valuable objects discovered there were carried away by foreign archaeologists. Even most of the better-preserved bas-reliefs and objects had been removed from their original contexts and taken to national or international museums.

Until recently, Iran was mostly closed to Western visitors. In 1973 a spike in oil prices caused Iran's economy to flood with foreign currencies, resulting in inflation and widespread corruption. By 1975 an economic recession had set in, which led to increasing unemployment and resentment of the ruling regime. From 1978 to 1979 the Iranian Revolution eventually resulted in the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of the ruling Pahlavi dynasty.[122] The political turmoil of the 1980s made it almost impossible to travel there for research or fieldwork, but in the last few years, this has begun to change, allowing the study of ancient Persia to be done with renewed vigor.

Persepolis was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979, for being the example par excellence of the Achaemenid dynastic city, as well as a unique reflection of the art and culture of other nations that existed during their period of rule. Indeed, perhaps no other ancient site in the world reflects such a mixture of global art and culture as Persepolis. Since 1979, much attention has been directed to determining the borders of the city's hinterland, and for managing the increasing numbers of tourists that visit the fragile site. By 2000, more than 400,000 people were visiting Persepolis each year, bringing with them a range of conservation issues.[123] Further problems are caused by the urban spread of the nearby town of Marvdasht and other smaller villages surrounding the terrace, as well as the construction of various industries in the vicinity that risk polluting the site.[124] The long-term impact of these developments remain to be seen, but steps are being made to monitor and mitigate the risk of losing a site that, despite all odds, has lasted for so long.

As remarkable as Persepolis may be, history still has never given the Persian capital its due. It was one of the greatest architectural achievements of the ancient world. The complex was an architectural symphony, with each structure built to harmonize with one another. To prove their power, the Persian kings set out to create nothing less than paradise on Earth.

Beyond housing the royal entourage, these extraordinary buildings were used for a variety of purposes, and clues to the function of Persepolis lie carved into the walls and staircases of the city. In the scenes depicted in these stunning stone reliefs, the lives of those who lived in the city can be given a personality and identity.

As it turns out, the Greeks, whose civilization became the root of Western civilization as a whole and called the Persians barbarians, committed a gross act of vandalism and barbarity by destroying one of the most magnificent cities on the planet. Alexander's campaign may have destroyed Persepolis as a living city, but its story survived, always associated with those who built it and the individual who destroyed it. Moreover, the Persian approach to architecture, gardens, textiles, and luxury was copied by other civilizations – including the Greeks – and has survived to this day.

In the end, the Persians' greatest achievement of all was the empire itself.

The characteristics of the Persian Empire were respect for their subjects, religious tolerance, and the promotion of trade, art, and culture. The first truly global empire in history was built and sustained on a model of tolerance and respect for other cultures that few great powers have ever matched.

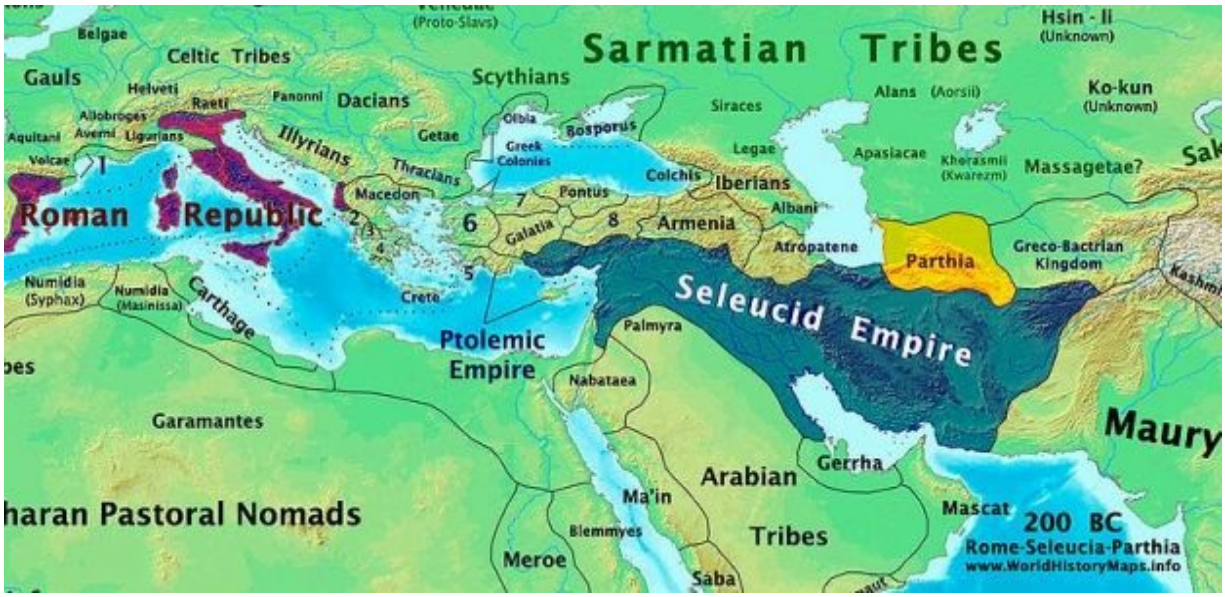
The Geographic and Ethnic Origins of the Parthians

Sculpture of a young boy in a Parthian outfit

Modern scholars generally classify the Parthians as a Persian dynasty, but they hailed from different origins than their Achaemenid Persian predecessors. Specifically, the Parthians were originally part of a tribe known

as the Parni or Aparni, who originated on the eastern edge of the Caspian Sea (Colledge 1967, 25). After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, a vacuum was left from the number of kingdoms that he and his army toppled in their eastern campaign. A new political order emerged when various, formerly nomadic peoples migrated into to central Asia and established new kingdoms. The Parni were one of these formerly nomadic groups who migrated into the regions of Parthian and Bactria and became known as the Parthians (College 1967, 25).

The Parthians spoke a northern dialect of the Middle Persian language, which became known as “Asacid Phalavi” (College 1967, 68), but once they assumed power over the region and the plethora of different tribes and peoples, they made no attempts to impose their language on their subjects; in fact, it appears that the Parthians adjusted their linguistic background to a certain extent in order to make the dynastic transition more smoothly. Moreover, although the Parthians’ native language was a form of Persian, they adopted Greek as the administrative language of their empire since it was the language of their predecessors, the Seleucids (Colledge 1967, 68). The Parthians never imposed the Persian language on their subjects though as they also allowed their subjects to keep their own native languages, but the Aramaic script, along with Greek, attained widespread use, especially in many official documents (Boyce 2001, 95). The linguistic and cultural diversity of the Parthian Empire was something that was passed down from the Achaemenids and Seleucids, and for the most part the Parthians followed in their predecessors’ footsteps by treating those different peoples with a relatively light hand.



A map of the region at the end of the 3rd century BCE

Besides inheriting a number of different subject peoples, the Parthians also took hold of a number of different cities that were built by previous dynasties. The heart of the Parthian homeland was located in central Asia, roughly contiguous with modern day northeast Iran and western Afghanistan, and the Parthians inherited a number of notable cities that were built by the Seleucids, Achaemenids, and Elamites before them, such as Susa and Seleucia, but they also founded a number of their own impressive cities. The first Parthian king, Arsaces I (247-217 BCE), founded the city of Dara (Brosius 2010, 103), but it was the city of Nisa/Mithradatkert that was built by Mithridates I (171-138 BC) that became the first true capital of the Parthian Empire (Brosius 2010, 103). Located in the mountains of northern Parthia, Mithradatkert not only served as an important political and administrative center in the Parthian Empire, but was perhaps one of the more important spiritual centers. It was at Mithradatkert where the tombs of the Parthian kings were located, which gave the city an extra level of importance throughout the lifespan of the Parthian dynasty (Brosius 2010, 111). The tombs provided a physical, focal point for the Parthians to demonstrate the legitimacy of their dynasty as well as an important part of their religion, which will be discussed below.

A coin depicting Arsaces I

A relief depicting Mithridates on horseback

Picture of the ruins of Nisa

Mithridates I proved to be a very energetic building king, as he also founded the city of Ctesiphon during his reign. Ctesiphon was the westernmost city built by the Parthians as it sat on the banks of the Tigris River in Mesopotamia across from the Seleucid city of Seleucis. The Parthians followed a practice similar to the Achaemenid Persians of having a capital circuit; the king and his court would travel from city to city depending on the season and circumstances, and wherever the king and his court were located was considered the capital. Due to its western location and proximity to the west, the Romans regarded Ctesiphon as the primary Parthian capital (Brosius 2010, 103), but the Romans were often largely ignorant of geographic locations within the Parthian heartland. Ctesiphon was essentially turned into a winter palace by king Orodes II's (58-38 BC) son, Pacorus (Colledge 1967, 67), but it remained an important city throughout the entire Parthian period.

Across the river from Ctesiphon was the former Seleucid capital of

Seleucis, which was diminished in importance after the foundation of Ctesiphon but continued to serve as an administrative center and royal mint for the Parthians (Brosius 2010, 110). Eventually, Ctesiphon grew to a point where it engulfed Seleucis and the two became part of a larger ancient metropolitan area (Brosius 2010, 103).

The Parthian Government and Imperial Administration

The importance of the cities that the Parthians inherited from the Achaemenids and Seleucids should not be underestimated, but the greatest gift they received from their predecessors was their system of government.

At the head of the Parthian government was the king, whose rule was considered absolute and mandated by gods, but since the Parthian kings ruled such a vast and diverse empire (both culturally and geographically), it was imperative that they implement an efficient system to keep order. Fortunately for the Parthians, they had to do little in this respect since the Seleucids, who the Parthians conquered, already had a fairly sophisticated imperial administration in place that they in turn inherited from the Achaemenid Persians.

The Achaemenid Persians divided their empire into provinces, which are usually referred to by modern scholars with the ancient Greek word *satrapies*. The number of satrapies fluctuated, but there were usually somewhere between 20-25 of them. When Alexander the Great defeated the Achaemenid Persians, he destroyed their empire but not their imperial administration, because after his death his top generals divided the spoils and started new dynasties – Seleucis founded the Seleucid dynasty in Mesopotamia and for the most part based his new dynasty's administrative districts on the Achaemenid satrapal divisions (Colledge 1967, 57).

The Seleucids went further and subdivided the satrapies into *eparchies*, *hyparchies*, and fortified villages known as *stathmos* (Colledge 1967, 57). The Parthians adopted these Achaemenid and Seleucid divisions, but they also viewed their kingdom unofficially as being comprised of an Upper and Lower kingdom. The Upper kingdom of Parthia included Parthia proper and Armenia as two of the most important regions, while the Lower kingdom

included Babylonia, Persis, and Elymais (Susa region) as the three most vital among many areas (Brosius 2010, 113).

One aspect where the Parthians differed from their predecessors was that they allowed some regions to retain more autonomy than others. For instance, Persis and Elymais were ruled by local kings, while the other provinces were overseen by a governor, or satrap, who was appointed by the Parthian king (Brosius 2010, 115). When the Parthian Empire was strong and the economic situation was good, this situation worked well, but during periods of instability the regional, semi-autonomous kings were able to assert more authority and even court outside forces, namely the Romans, for support.

The Parthians not only inherited the administrative divisions from their Achaemenid Persian and Seleucid predecessors, but also some aspects of royal ideology, as well as administrative techniques. For example, the Parthian kings continued the tradition of minting royal coins that was first initiated by the Achaemenids and continued with the Seleucids, and the coins not only served as currency during all three dynasties but also served to advertise the power of the Parthian kings throughout their realm (Brosius 2010, 101). The royal coins were often inscribed in the Seleucids' language of Greek, but that was not the only language the Parthians used in their administrative documents. A number of extant economic texts have been discovered in the Parthian city of the Nisa that were written in a variety of different languages, including Middle Persian, Greek, and Aramaic (Brosius 2010, 118).

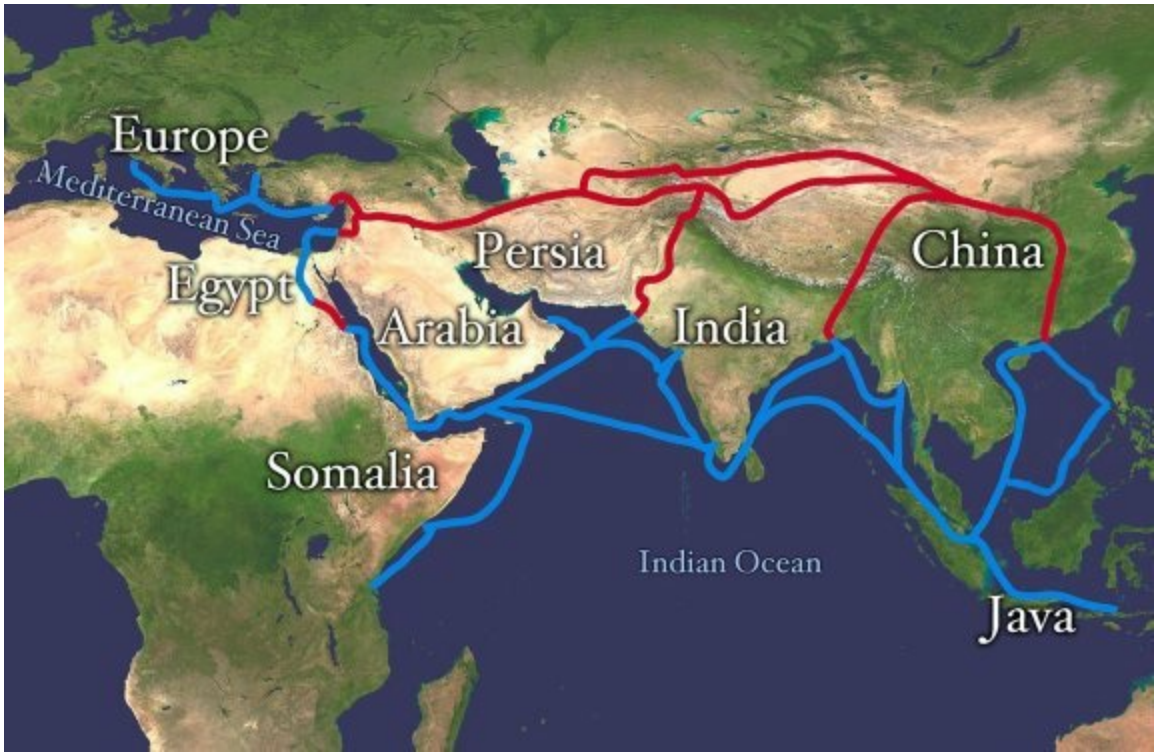
The Parthian Economy and Trade

The high number of documents pertaining to trade is one indication of the Parthians' ancient entrepreneurial abilities, and their economy was one of the most noteworthy aspects of their empire. At the height of their power, the Parthians were as wealthy as the Romans to the west and the Chinese to the east, which was not primarily the result of their conquests but instead came through their control of important trade routes that linked the west and east. Since most of the Parthian Empire was landlocked, it relied on overland caravan routes to move commodities to and from the empire. A single trade caravan could include up to 1,000 Bactrian (two humped) camels that could carry 400-500 pounds of goods each (Brosius 2010, 123).

The extensive economic activity was conducted throughout the Parthian Empire and has been recorded on numerous documents, but modern archaeological excavations have also revealed that one of the more important economic regions was around the ancient city of Susa. The city of Susa was host to many different peoples and dynasties before the Parthians took control of it, from Elamites to the Achaemenid Persians and then the Seleucids, and they all understood the economic importance of the city. The agricultural region near the city was especially fertile, and the age of the city meant that the inhabitants were used to trade and had existing facilities to carry it out. By the time the Parthians took control of the Susa region most of its inhabitants were either Hellenized locals or Greeks (Wenke 1981, 306), so the idea of civilization and a sophisticated economy was nothing new to Susians. Archaeological evidence, in the form of coins and the remains of other commodities, demonstrate that Susa continued to be an important economic center during the Parthian period, especially for its agricultural output (Wenke 1981, 304).

Susa provided a vital economic link within the confines of the Parthian Empire, but the Parthians themselves provided the first true economic link between the western and eastern worlds. Before the Parthians came to power, the peoples of the Far East and those of Europe and the Near East knew very little about each other and contact was for the most part nonexistent. However, the Parthians bridged the gap between Asia and Europe when they established commercial and diplomatic relations with the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) (Brosius 2010, 82). The Chinese emperors viewed the Parthians as both trading partners and allies against the numerous hordes that attempted to invade China, and the Chinese paid premiums for Parthian horses while the Parthians received silk, which was much coveted in the west (Brosius 2010, 83). Indeed, it was during the Parthian Empire that the famed “Silk Route” came into maturity through the careful manipulation of the Parthians. The Silk Route is the term used for the many overland caravan routes that connected China with the Near East and the West, and as the name implies, the most prized commodity to flow through the Route was silk from China, which the Romans were willing to pay premiums for to convert into clothing and bedsheets. Nearly all of the overland caravan routes had to travel through Parthian territory, which the Parthians were able to exploit as

middlemen in the trade process. As long as the Romans and other peoples of the west had a demand for Chinese silk, the Parthians grew wealthy.



A map of the most famous routes on the Silk Road

When Augustus became emperor of Rome in 27 BC he ushered in an era known as the *Pax Romana*, or "Roman Peace." Augustus promoted free trade both within Roman territory and with Rome's neighbors. The many roads throughout the Empire became arteries that brought trade to and from Rome and maritime trade also increased exponentially during Augustus' rule (Temin 2006, 136). Particularly, silk became much more common throughout the Roman Empire during the reign of Augustus and in fact continued to be available throughout Roman territory until its fall (Thorley 1971, 71). But the Romans were only the westernmost terminus of the Silk Route; long before the silk reached Rome it had to pass through a number of different kingdoms among which the Parthians were the most important.

An ancient statue of Augustus

After the Silk Road was firmly established around 90 CE, silk from northern China only had to pass through four kingdoms/empires: China, Kushan, Parthia, and Rome, so the logistics of the route were simple for the most part. The key role that the Parthians played in the facilitation of the Silk Road revolved around their control of the actual Chinese merchants and their product – once the Chinese merchants safely travelled through the Kushan kingdom, they were forced to stop and trade in the Parthian city of Merv (Thorley 1971, 75). The Chinese merchants would then take Parthian horses, lions, and/or a plethora of Roman commodities back to China while Parthian merchants would continue westward in order to trade with Roman merchants (Thorley 1971, 75-76). Although the Chinese knew of the Romans, who they referred to as T-tsin, they never had direct contact with them and were forced

to deal with the Parthian intermediaries.

A picture of ancient Chinese silk from the 2nd century BCE

The Chinese coveted Roman gold and silver the most (Thorley 1971, 76), but ironically they also desired a manufactured version of the very silk that they sold to the Parthians and Romans. Today, most people know little about the process of silk manufacturing other than that it originates with the silk worm in some form, but the process of creating ancient silk garments in the ancient world was complex. The Chinese exported silk in a closely-woven, heavy form that was quite different from what the Romans, or modern people, consider silk (Thorley 1971, 77). Traders in Syria then unraveled and rewove the Chinese silk on looms to create a transparent gauze with other materials woven into it, which was essentially what is considered silk (Thorley 1971, 77). The Parthians were then able take the manufactured silk and sell it back to the Chinese at a nice profit (Thorley 1971, 77).

Although there are numerous written sources that document Parthian trade

with the Chinese and various peoples of the west, there are no indications in those texts why the Parthians prohibited Chinese merchants to pass through their empire. Perhaps the Parthians were aware of the silk manufacturing process and wanted to keep it a secret in order to protect their lucrative position as middlemen on the Silk Route, or possibly they felt that allowing significant amount of foreigners on their roads posed a security risk. Whatever the reasons for the Parthians to control access to the Silk Route, it helped propel them to a wealthy status amongst their peers, but it also helped to contribute to their military power, which ultimately threatened the world's greatest empire: Rome.

War with Rome

As the Parthians grew richer due to their control of the Silk Road, they were able to use that wealth to build a state-of-the-art army and expand their borders. The period of Parthian expansion and international prestige can be traced to the reign of Mithridates I (171-139/8 BC), who took advantage of political instability in the west, which was primarily the result of the weakened status of the Seleucid dynasty (Brosius 2010, 86). In 141 BC Mithridates I was recognized as the king by the Babylonian elites, which marked the beginning of first Parthian influence and then outright control of Mesopotamia (Brosius 2010, 89). Mithridates I's successors, Pharates I (139/8-128 BC) and Artabanus I (128/7-124 BC), continued to expand Parthian control, although the Seleucid dynasty still challenged them in the west and nomadic invasions remained a problem in the northeast (Brosius 2010, 89). It was during the reign of Mithridates II (124-87 BC) that the Parthians were finally able to gain uncontested control of Mesopotamia and with it sent the Seleucid dynasty to the dust bin of history (Brosius 2010, 90). Once the Seleucid dynasty was destroyed the Parthians had to contend with the Romans for control of the Near East.

A coin depicting Mithridates I

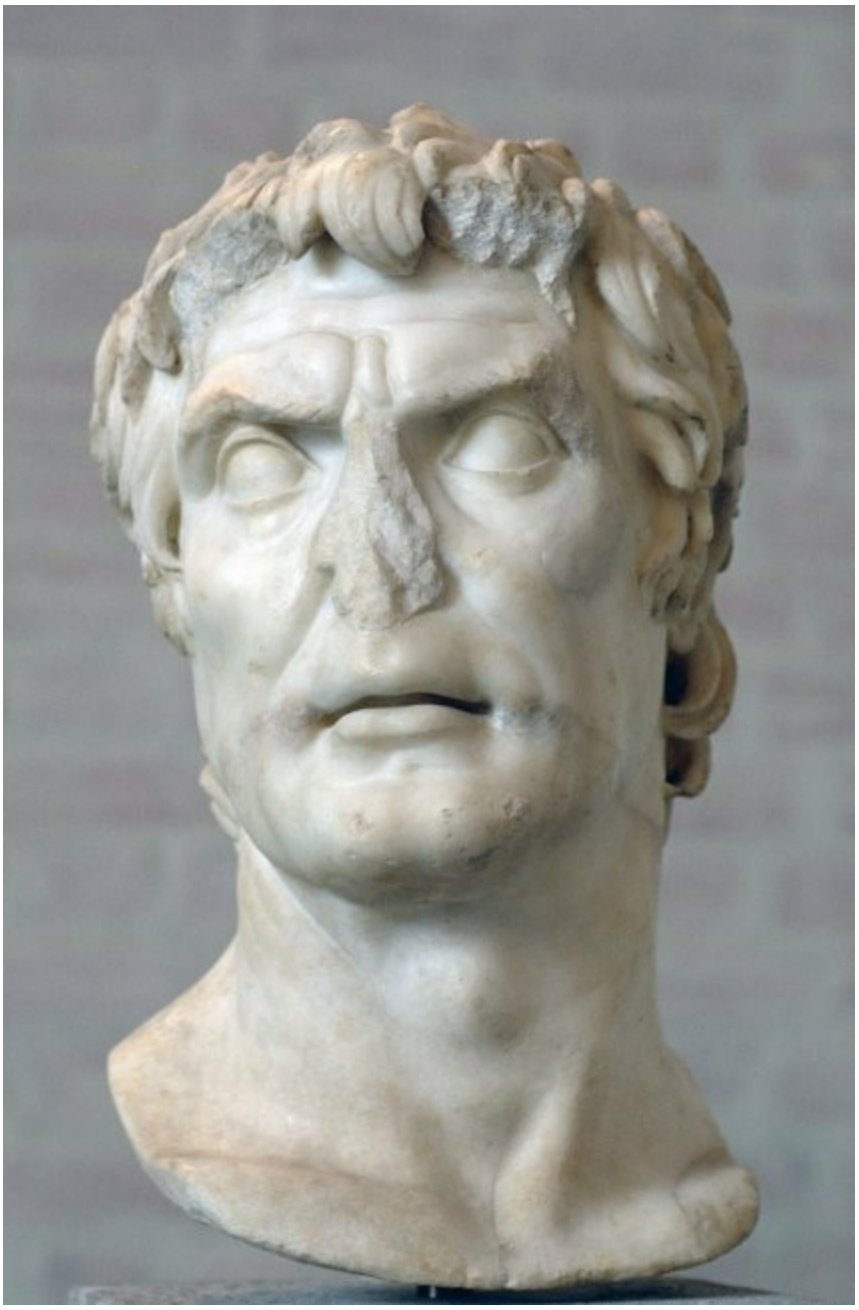
Rome and Parthia engaged in a series of wars in the 1st century BCE, known as the Mithridatic Wars by the Romans, for control of the eastern Mediterranean region. Early on, the site of most of the battles and campaigns took place near the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia, but control of Armenia was usually the root cause of conflict (Brosius 2010, 82). The Romans often tried to install puppet pro-Roman kings on the Armenian throne, and they also frequently tried to foment discord within the Parthian court by supporting pretenders to the Parthian throne (Brosius 2010, 92). Needless to say the Parthians were not happy with the Romans' duplicitous dealings, which led to the numerous wars and conflicts between the two peoples.

One of the first major conflicts between the Romans and Parthians that was recorded by Greco-Roman writers took place during the late Republican Period. The famous biographer Plutarch wrote about how the Roman general Sulla embarked on a military campaign on the edge of Parthian territory and then met with some Parthian officials on the banks of the Euphrates River:

> "After his praetorship, he was sent out to Cappadocia, ostensibly to reinstate Ariobarzanes, but really to check the restless activities of Mithridates, who was adding to his dominion and power fully as much as he had inherited. Accordingly, he took out with him no large force of his own, but made use of the allies, whom he found eager to serve him, and after slaying many of the Cappadocians

themselves, and yet more of the Armenians who came to their aid, he drove out Gordiusm and made Ariobarzanes king again.

"As he lingered on the banks of the Euphrates, he received a visit from Orobazus, a Parthian, who came as an ambassador from king Arsaces, although up to this time the two nations had held no intercourse with one another. This also is thought to have been part of Sulla's great good fortune, that he should be the first Roman with whom the Parthians held conference when they wanted alliance and friendship. On this occasion, too, it is said that he ordered three chairs to be set, one for Ariobarznes, one for Orobazus, and one for himself, and that he sat between them both and gave them audience. For this the king of Parthia afterwards put Orobazus to death; and while some people commended Sulla for the airs which he assumed with the Barbarians, others accused him of vulgarity and ill-timed arrogance." (Plutarch, *Sulla*, V, 3-6).

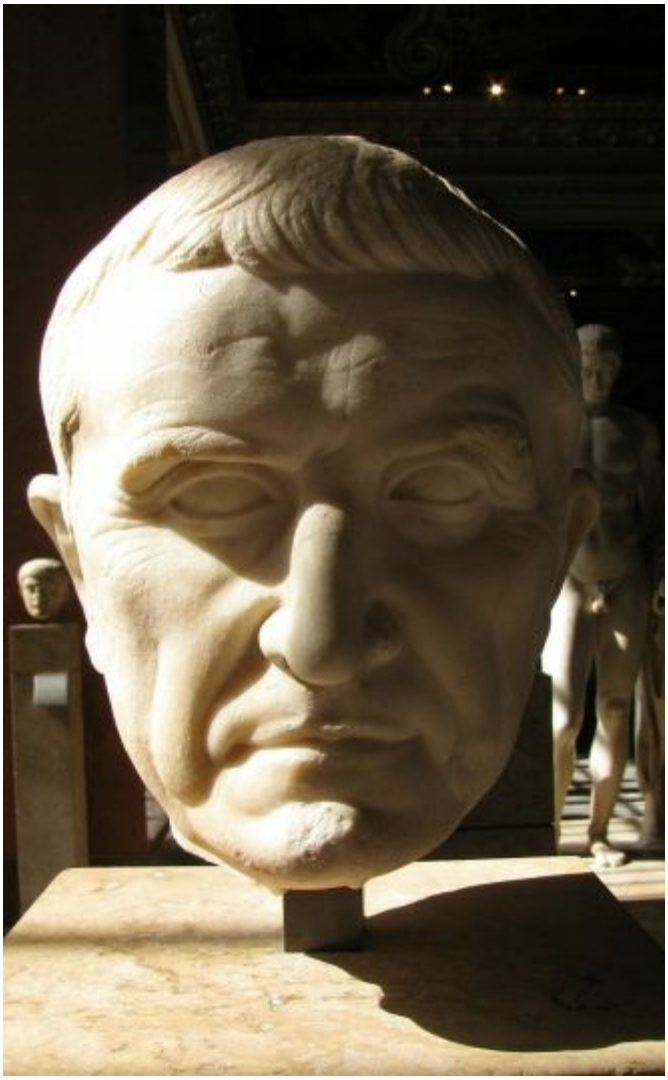


An ancient bust of Sulla

Although this account is not as exciting as later ones that detail battles between the Romans and Parthians, it demonstrates a bit of the Roman arrogance and cultural misunderstanding that they became known for in other points of history. Sulla's slight toward the Parthian king would at least partially be responsible for number of wars between the two peoples that lasted until the end of the Parthian Empire, most of which took place during

Rome’s imperial phase.

One particular campaign during the late Republic cemented poor relations between the Romans and Parthians for over 200 years. Several years after Sulla’s first foray into Parthian territory the Roman general and consul Crassus tried his hand at influencing the politics of Armenia and Mesopotamia. Crassus is best known for forming the First Triumvirate along with Pompey and Julius Caesar and playing an important role in the Civil Wars, but his role in the early conflicts between the Romans and Parthians was just as important. Under the consulship of Pompey, Rome supported a pretender to the Parthian throne, which naturally angered the legitimate Parthian king Orodes II (58/7-38 BCE) and led to war in 53 BCE that ended in disaster for the Romans (Brosius 2010, 94).



An ancient bust of Crassus

The failed Roman military campaign was detailed by both the 3rd century historian Cassius Dio and Plutarch. The Roman invasion began in Mesopotamia and the accounts reveal that hubris on the part of the Romans certainly played a role in their ultimate defeat. Dio wrote, “When Crassus had invaded Mesopotamia, as has been stated, Orodes sent envoys to him in Syria to censure him for the invasion and to ask the causes of the war; at the same time he sent Surenas with an army to the captured and revolted districts. For the had it in mind to lead an expedition in person against that part of Armenia which had once belonged to Tigranes, in order that Artabazes, the son of Tigranes, the king of the land at that time, should send no assistance to the Romans through fear for his own land. Now Crassus said that he would tell him in Seleucia the causes of the war; this is a city in Mesopotamia which even at the present day has a very large Greek population.” (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, XL, 16, 1-2).

Once Crassus and the Romans were established in Mesopotamia, they arrogantly overlooked the Parthian army and were led into a trap. Dio’s account explained, “It came about in this way. The Parthians confronted the Romans with most of their army hidden; for the ground was uneven in spots and wooded. Upon seeing them Crassus – not the commander, but the younger Crassus, who had come to his father from Gaul – felt scornful of them, since he supposed them to be alone, and so led out his cavalry against them, and when they turned purposely to fight, pursued them, thinking the victory was his; thus he was drawn far ways from the main army, and was then surrounded and cut down. When this had taken place, the Roman infantry did not turn back, but valiantly joined battle with the Parthians to avenge his death. Yet they accomplished nothing worthy of themselves because of the enemy’s numbers and tactics, and particularly because Abgarus was plotting against them.” (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, XL, 21, 2-3; 22, 1-2).

Despite their dogged defense, Crassus and the Romans were forced to flee for their lives, but the Parthians were not done. According to Dio, the Parthian general Surenas feared that if Crassus was allowed to escape back into Roman territory that he would return with an even larger force and defeat

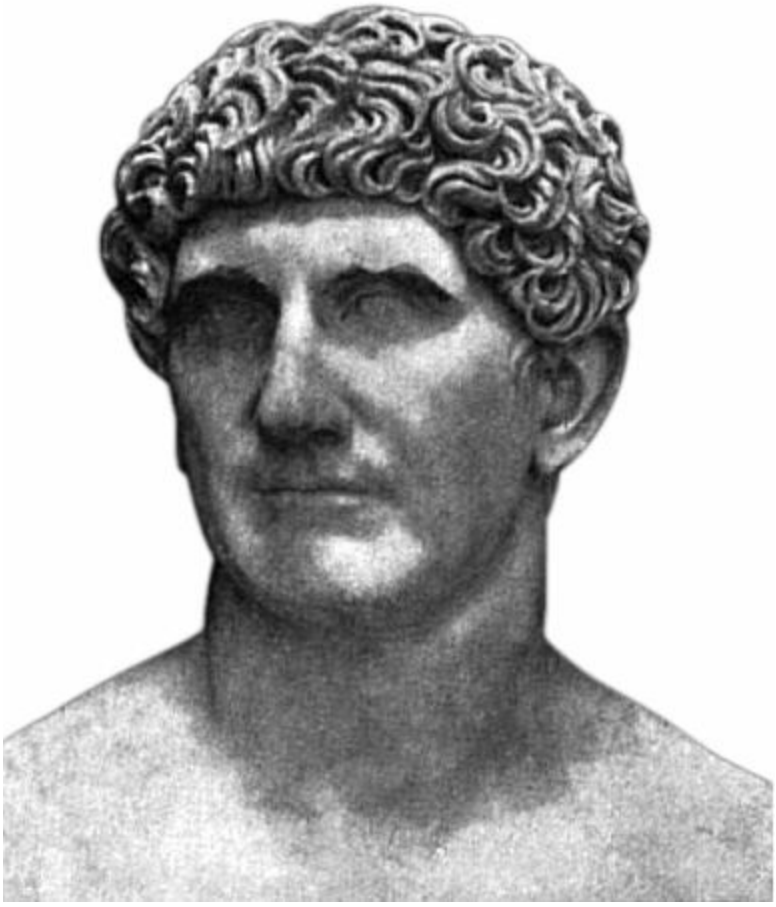
the Parthians. In order to prevent this, Surenas resorted to devious methods to defeat the Roman general by requesting a parlay with Crassus and sending a horse to retrieve him. Dio noted what happened next: “So Crassus descended to the level ground and Surenas sent him a present of a horse, to make sure of his coming to him more quickly; and while Crassus even then delayed and considered what he should do, the barbarians took him forcibly and threw him on the horse. Meanwhile the Romans also laid hold of him, came to blows with the others, and for a time held their own; then aid came to the barbarians, and they prevailed; for their forces, which were in the plain and had been made ready beforehand brought help to their men before the Romans on the high ground could to theirs. And not only the others fell, but Crassus also was slain, either by one of this own men to prevent his capture alive, or by the enemy because he was badly wounded. This was his end. And the Parthians, as some say, poured molten gold into his mouth in mockery.” (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, XL, 27, 1-3). If the Parthians did in fact pour molten gold down Crassus’ mouth, it was likely based on their knowledge that Crassus, one of the richest men in history, always thirsted for more wealth.

After Crassus’ death, the Parthians were able to inflict one of the most devastating losses on the Roman army. In addition to losing a competent general and former consul, the Romans lost their prized eagle standards, and only 10,000 of their 42,000 men returned from the campaign (Brosius 2010, 96).

The Parthians inflicted a heavy blow on the morale and military capabilities of the Romans in the east, but the unstable political situation in Rome contributed more to a period of peace between the two peoples than anything else. For most of the 1st century BCE, Rome was embroiled in a series of Civil Wars that left it vulnerable to the outside world, which is how Caesar was able to finish the Republic in the 40s BCE and Augustus was able to establish the Empire in 27 BCE.

After Crassus’ failed campaign against Parthia in 53 BCE, the only other Roman action against Parthia was a failed expedition by Mark Antony which was never a real threat to the Parthian homeland, and when Augustus became emperor, he ushered in a new era of material prosperity known as the

“Augustan Peace” (Temin 2006). Despite being a dictator with immense powers, such as the ability to veto the Senate, Augustus made every attempt to appear benevolent while securing his power base and establishing the Julio-Claudian Dynasty. Most of Augustus’ time was spent in the realm of domestic policy and concerns; foreign affairs were a distant concern to the young emperor, and war became anathema to his political program.



An ancient bust of Antony

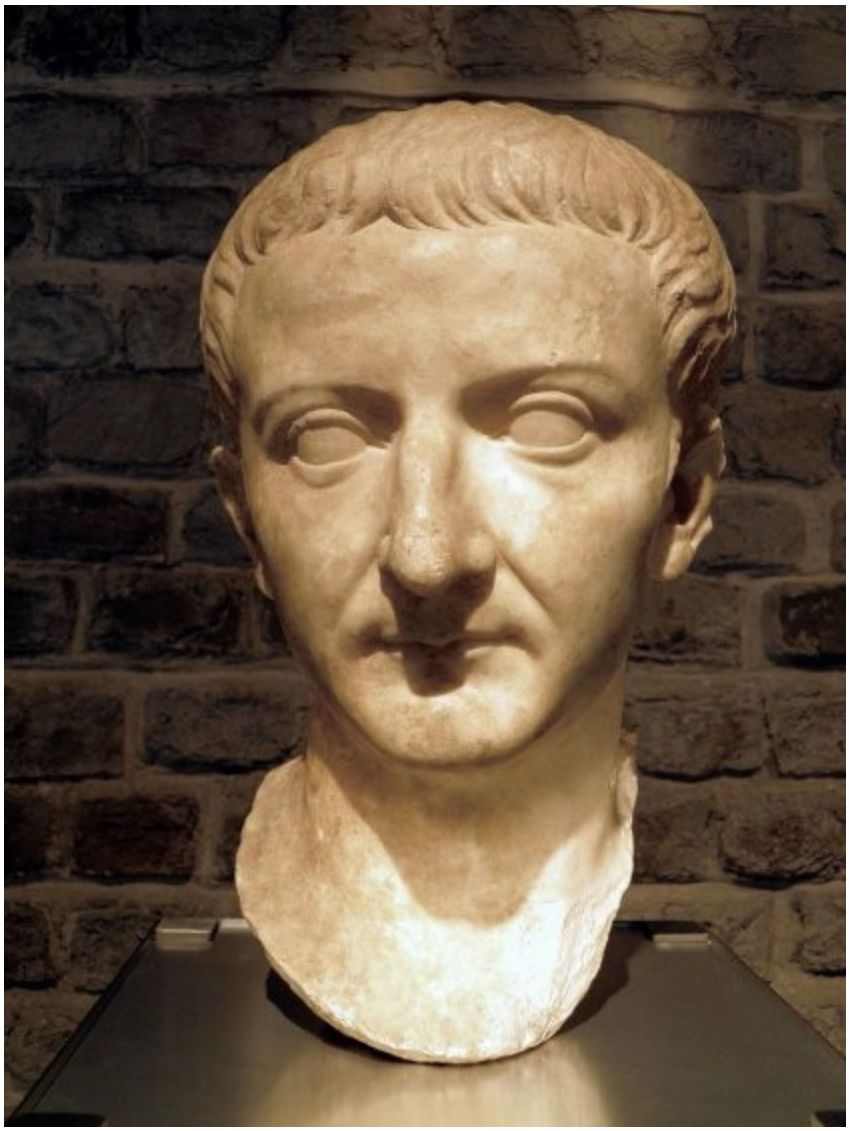
As a result of this, Augustus made peace with Parthia during the reign of king Pharaates IV (32-2 BC) in 20 BCE. The Roman-Parthian peace was exploited by Augustus as a victory, and later Romans wrote about how the Parthians groveled for peace and returned the standards they stole from Crassus. The early 2nd century Roman biographer Suetonius wrote, “The Parthians also were ready to grant Augustus’ claims on Armenia and, when he demanded the surrender of the Eagles captured from Marcus Crassus and

Mark Antony, not only returned them but offered hostages into the bargain; and once, because several rival princes were claiming the Parthian throne, they announced that they would elect whichever candidate he chose." (Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 22).

Like many narratives by ancient historians, this account is a mix of facts and hyperbole. The Parthians returned the standards, but there is no evidence to corroborate the claim that Augustus chose the next Parthian king. That said, both the accounts of Suetonius and the 2nd century Roman historian Tacitus relate that Augustus' successor, Tiberius (reigned 14-37), tried to influence the direction of the Parthian royal court. According to Suetonius, Tiberius' early foreign policy centered more on the attempted pacification of Germania, but Parthia was never far from his mind: "Tiberius was given another five years of tribunician power, with the task of pacifying Germany, and the Parthian envoys who visited Augustus at Rome with messages from their king were instructed to present themselves before Tiberius too, in Germany." (Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 16).

It was not long before Tiberius was faced with a formidable foe in the Parthian king Artabanus II (reigned 10-38), who forcefully overthrew his predecessor Vonones. Tiberius attempted to bribe Parthian officials and place spies in the Parthian court in order to place a friendlier king on the throne because Artabanus II apparently coveted the old boundaries of the Achaemenid Empire. Tacitus wrote, "In the consulate of Gaius Cestius and Marcus Sevillius, a number of Parthian nobles made their way to the capital without the knowledge of King Artabanus. That prince, loyal to Rome and temperate towards his subjects while he had Germanicus to fear, soon adopted an attitude of arrogance to ourselves and of cruelty to his countrymen. For he was emboldened by the campaigns he had successfully prosecuted against the surrounding nations; he disdained the old age of Tiberius as no longer fit for arms; and he coveted Armenia, on the throne of which (after the death of Artaxias) he installed his eldest son Arsaces, adding insult to injury by sending envoys to reclaim the treasure left by Vonones in Syria and Cilicia. At the same time, he referred in boastful and menacing terms to the old boundaries of the Persian and Macedonian empires, and to his intention of seizing the territories held first by Cyrus and afterwards by Alexander." (Tacitus, *The Annals*, VI, 31).

A coin depicting Artabanus II



Carole Raddato's picture of an ancient bust of Tiberius

Tiberius never led a major campaign against the Parthians, instead attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to control his enemies through intrigue and espionage. The treasure of Vonones that Tacitus wrote about was apparently recovered later by Tiberius, according to Suetonius: "As for Vonones, the king of Parthia, whom his subjects had dethroned but who, under the impression that he was confiding himself to Roman protection, escaped to Antioch with a huge treasure, Tiberius treacherously robbed and killed him." (Suetonius, Tiberius, 49)

Artabanus II was apparently too strong of a leader for Tiberius and the Romans to seriously challenge, but the strength and stability that he brought

to the Parthian Empire was short lived. At the height of his power, Artabanus II was assassinated by his own son, Gotarzes, whose actions thrust Parthia into a period of civil war. Once again, the Parthian sources are quiet concerning both the assassination and civil war, but Tacitus wrote an account on the confusing period in Parthian history. “That prince, king of Iberia and also brother of Mithridates, kept announcing that the Parthians were divided among themselves – the crown was in question, minor matters unregarded. For Gotarzes, among his numerous cruelties, had procured the murder of his brother Artabanus and his wife and son, with the result that the rest took alarm and called in Vardanes. He, with his usual alacrity for great adventures, covered three thousand stadia in two days; drove the unsuspecting and terrified Gotarzes into flight, and without hesitation seized the nearest satrapies – Seleucia alone refusing to acknowledge his supremacy.” (Tacitus, *The Annals*, XI, 8-10).

Despite the instability in Parthia, the Romans were unable to take advantage of the situation, but the rivalry between the two great peoples continued. The lull in the hostilities between the Parthians and Romans ended when Trajan (reigned 98-117) became emperor of Rome and embarked on three campaigns against Parthia in 114, 115, and 116, which caused as much damage to the Parthians as any previous Roman campaigns. During Trajan’s second campaign, he captured the Parthian city of Ctesiphon and was able to assert Roman control, albeit briefly, over Mesopotamia once more in 116 (Wenke 1981, 310). According to Dio, Trajan relied on engineering technology more than military might to conquer Ctesiphon: “Trajan had planned to conduct the Euphrates through a canal into the Tigris, in order that he might take his boats down by this route and use them to make a bridge. But learning that this river has a much higher elevation than the Tigris, he did not do so, fearing that the water might rush down in a flood and render the Euphrates unnavigable. So he used hauling-engines to drag the boats across the very narrow space that separates the two rivers (the whole stream of the Euphrates empties into a marsh and from there somehow joins the Tigris); then he crossed the Tigris and entered Ctesiphon. When he had taken possession of this place he was saluted imperator and established his right to the title of Parthicus. In addition to other honours voted to him by the senate, he was granted the privilege of celebrating as many triumphs as he should

desire.” (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXVIII, 28, 1-3).

An ancient bust of Trajan

Although Trajan was given triumphs and columns were erected that proclaimed his victories in the Near East over the Parthians, the Romans were unable to hold onto Ctesiphon. In fact, the Parthian city would continue to be the focal point of conflict between the Romans and Parthians; the Roman general Avidius Cassius led a major campaign against Seleucia and Ctesiphon during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-180), but his army was forced to retreat when the Antonine Plague devastated his troops

(Brosius 2010, 100).

Despite Rome's growing economic problems in the 3rd century, the emperors Septimus Severus, Caracalla, and Macrinus all led campaigns against Parthia. The Romans are often heralded by modern scholars for their efficiency, but their policy in regards to Parthia, especially in the 3rd century, can best be described as obstinate. Numerous Roman defeats at the hands of the Parthians under several different emperors never deterred a new emperor or general from embarking on the chimerical idea of defeating the Parthians once and for all. The Parthian king Vologases V (reigned 191/2-207/8) defended his kingdom from a vigorous campaign led by the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (reigned 193-211) around 198. While the Romans were fighting among themselves, the Parthians managed to retake Mesopotamia, which then became the focal point of Septimius Severus' campaign. Dio recounted, "After this Severus made a campaign against the Parthians. For while he had been occupied with the civil wars they had taken advantage of their immunity and had captured Mesopotamia, whither they had made an expedition in full force. . . As the Parthians did not await his arrival but retired homeward (their leader was Vologaesus, whose brother was accompanying Severus), he constructed boat on the Euphrates and proceeded forward partly by marching along the river. The boats thus built were exceedingly swift and speedy and well constructed, for the forest along the Euphrates and that region in general afforded him an abundant supply of timber. Thus he soon had seized Seleucia and Babylon, both of which had been abandoned. Later, upon capturing Ctesiphon, he permitted the soldiers to plunder the entire city, and he slew a vast number of people, besides taking as many as a hundred thousand captives. He did not, however, pursue Vologaesus, nor even occupy Ctesiphon, but, just as if the sole purpose of his campaign had been to plunder this place." (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXVI, 9, 1-4).

A bust of Severus

A coin depicting Vologases V

Dio’s account may make it seem as though Vologases V and the Parthians

retreated in fear from the Romans, but a closer examination reveals that they may have merely conducted a strategic retreat. As discussed above, the Parthian Empire was so vast that the Romans did not even comprehend its size properly, meaning it was possible Vologases V decided to retreat into the interior until Septimius Severus and his legions were sated by plunder. The Parthian king also probably knew of the social and economic problems that were plaguing Rome at the time, so he knew that the Romans would be unable to occupy any Parthian territory in Mesopotamia for very long.

Vologases V witnessed the growing weakness of Parthia's greatest enemy, but it was his successor, Vologases VI (208-228), who endured the last two major campaigns by the Romans against his people. Throughout this period, the growing weakness of Rome did not stop its emperors from embarking on new military campaigns. In fact, in the latter stages of the empire, Roman emperors became dependent on the legions for their support, which could sometimes be capricious as they often played the role of kingmaker. The result was that incompetent and often extremely violent emperors ruled Rome and constantly led the Empire into unwinnable campaigns.

Vologases VI had to contend with two Roman military campaigns, and the first was led by the emperor Caracalla (188-217) in 216. According to Dio, Caracalla (who Dio called Antonius) led a campaign deep into the Parthian homeland but accomplished little more than desecrate some Parthian tombs."So Antonius now ravaged a large section of the country around Media by making a sudden incursion, sacked many fortresses, won over Arbela, dug open the royal tombs of the Parthians, and scattered the bones about. . . When the Parthians and Medes, greatly angered by the treatment they had received, proceeded to raise a large army, he fell into the greatest terror. For, though he was most bold with his threats and most reckless in his undertakings, yet he was the greatest coward in the face of danger and the greatest weakling in the presence of hardships." (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXIX, 1, 2-4).

An ancient bust of Caracalla

The success of Caracalla's campaign into Parthia, like the other Roman ones before him, was for the most part pyrrhic, as the Romans were not able to keep any territory they gained. Caracalla was killed not long after in an assassination that may have been orchestrated by the head of the Praetorian Guards and eventual successor to the office of emperor, Macrinus (217-18). Perhaps not surprisingly, Macrinus continued Caracalla's inane policy towards Parthia by leading a campaign against Parthia in 218. Marcinus

hoped to retake Mesopotamia, which the Parthians occupied after the death of Caracalla, but the Roman emperor's campaign ended in a stalemate. Of course, he still tried to use propaganda to turn it into a victory, as relayed by Dio: "And the Parthian was not loath to come to terms, both for his reason and because his troops were exceedingly restive, due to their having been kept away from home an unusually long time as well as to the scarcity of food; for they had no food supplies available, either from stores previously made ready, since they do not make any such preparations, or from the country itself, inasmuch as the food either had been destroyed or else was in the forts. Macrinus, however did not forward a full account of all their arrangements to the senate, and consequently sacrifices of victory were voted in his honour and the name of Parthicus was bestowed upon him. But this he declined, being ashamed, apparently, to take a title from an enemy by home had been defeated." (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXIX, 27, 2-3).

Perhaps it was not Macrinus' conscience at all that prevented him from accepting the title because he was executed not long after his Parthian debacle. Either way, Marcrinus' campaign was the last time that the Romans and Parthians are known to have met on the battlefield according to records; the Parthian dynasty was almost finished, and Rome was well into its decay and its borders were contracting.

The numerous battles between the Romans and Parthians appear for the most part to be futile, but the 1st century BC Greco-Roman geographer Strabo wrote about one positive unintended side effect of the wars. Strabo is one of the best known of the ancient geographers, and his multivolume work has been preserved and translated over a number of generations into several different languages. The geographer's accounts not only give modern scholars a glimpse into how the Greeks and Romans viewed their neighbors and the land around them but also how they obtained that information. According to Strabo, the Parthians were responsible for giving people in the west new geographic information about previously unknown lands in the east. "Indeed, the spread of the empires of the Romans and of the Parthians has presented to geographers of to-day a considerable addition to our empirical knowledge of geography, just as did the campaign of Alexander to geographers of earlier times, as Eratosthenes points out. For Alexander opened up for us geographers a great part of Asia and all the northern part of

Europe as far as the Ister River; the Romans have made known all the western part of Europe as far as the River Albis (which divides Germany into two parts), and the regions beyond the Ister as far as the Tyras River; and Mithridates, surnamed Eupator, and his generals have made known the regions beyond the Tyraas as far as Lake Maeotis and the line of coast that ends at Colchis; and, again the Parthians have increased our knowledge in regard to Hyrcania and Bactriana, and in regard to the Scythians who live north of Hyrcania and Bactriana, all of which countries were but imperfectly known to the earlier geographers. (Strabo, *Geography*, I, 2.1)

Although the Romans may not have liked the Parthians, they respected the knowledge that they had of the world and no doubt they also respected them as warriors. After all, those Parthian warriors were ultimately the ones who kept the Roman Empire from expanding further east.

Parthian Warfare and Military

A depiction of a Parthian infantryman

Since Parthia's battles with Rome comprise such a large and important part of Parthian history, historians have long been interested in Parthian military tactics, techniques, and weapons. Similar to other aspects of Parthian history, the Parthians left few written records that detailed how they conducted their military affairs, and because of this, modern scholars are forced to combine what few Parthian records do exist with Roman accounts and archaeological and art historical remains from Parthia to create an image of the Parthian army.

One Roman writer discussed Parthian warfare in detail: “The government of the nation, after their revolt from the Macedonian power, was in the hands of kings. Next to the royal authority is the order of the people, from which they take generals in war and magistrates in peace. Their language is something between those of the Scythians and Medes, being a compound of both. Their dress was formerly of a fashion peculiar to themselves; afterwards, when their power had increased, it was like that of the Medes, light and full flowing. The fashion of their arms is that of their own country and of Scythia. They have an army, not like other nations, of free men, but chiefly consisting of slaves, the members of whom daily increase, the power of manumission being allowed to none, and all their offspring, in consequence, being born slaves. These bondmen they bring up as carefully as their own children, and teach them, with great pains, the arts of riding and shooting with the bow. As any one is eminent in wealth, so he furnishes the king with a proportionate number of horsemen for war. Indeed when fifty thousand cavalry encountered Antony, as he was making war upon Parthia, only four hundred of them were free men. Of engaging with the enemy in close fight, and of taking cities by siege, they know nothing. They fight on horseback, either galloping forward or turning their backs. Often, too, they counterfeit flight, that they may throw their pursuers off their guard against being wounded by their arrows. The signal for battle among them is given, not by trumpet but by drum. Nor are they able to fight long; but they would be irresistible, if their vigour and perseverance were equal to the fury of their onset. In general they retire before the enemy in the very heat of the engagement, and, soon after their retreat, return to the battle afresh; so that, when you feel most certain that you have conquered them, you have still to meet the greatest danger from them. Their armour, and that of their horses, is formed of plates, lapping over one another like the feathers of a bird, and covers both man and horse entirely. Of gold and silver, except for adorning their arms, they make no use.”

In the Parthian army equestrian and archery skills were paramount to any other since they needed to rely on mobility to traverse the vast distances of their empire. At the top of the Parthian military pyramid were the armed cavalrymen known as cataphracts. Cataphracts were almost always members of the nobility since they were the only ones who could afford the best horses

and armor needed to make up this class (Brosius 2010, 116).

Perhaps the best primary source account of the Parthian military is a short but highly detailed one from Dio. “The Parthians make no use of a shield, but their forces consist of mounted archers and pikemen, mostly in full armour. Their infantry is small, made up of the weaker men; but even these are all archers. They practise from boyhood, and the climate and the land combine to aid both horsemanship and archery. The land, being for the most part level, is excellent for raising horses and very suitable for riding about on horse-back; at any rate, even in war they lead about whole droves of horses, so that they can use different ones at different times, can ride up suddenly from a distance and also retire to a distance speedily.” (Dio, *Roman History*, XL,15, 3-4).

Dio’s emphasis on the importance of equestrian abilities brings to mind an often referenced but little understood term: “the Parthian shot.” The Parthian shot was a maneuver whereby the Parthian horseman would fire arrows from his bow as he retreated. The tactic so impressed the Romans that the term “Parthian shot” or “Parthian retreat” became common and eventually made its way into the modern lexicon, when it now usually refers to a verbal slight that someone gives towards the end of an argument or conversation.

Unfortunately, even though the Parthian Shot has been referenced numerous times throughout history, few physical depictions of it exist; the limited depictions of the Parthian Shot come primarily from non-Parthian sources, particularly Greek vases from the Hellenistic/Seleucid period. The esteemed Russian-American classical historian Michael Rostovtzeff examined pottery evidence from the Hellenistic period that depict Parthian horsemen. In one piece a man wearing traditional Parthian garb is riding a long, thin horse typical of the central Asian and south Russian steppes. The Parthian horseman is shown with his body and head turned shooting an arrow at his Greek adversary, who is at his behind (Rostovtzeff 1943, 177). Rostovtzeff correctly concluded that the figure depicted was a Parthian warrior engaged in the famed Parthian Shot or Parthian Retreat, but he carried his analysis further in order to determine the possible origin of the Parthian Shot. The historian added that the earliest known depictions of riders shooting in retreat were dated to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE and were

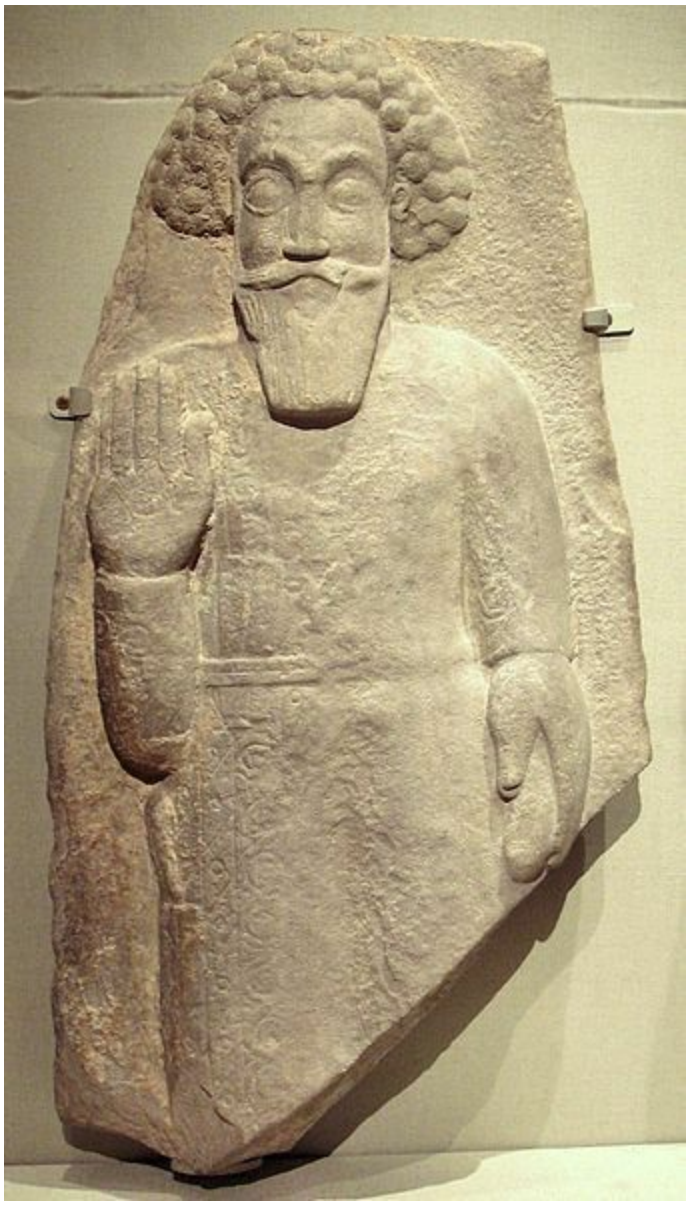
products of Assyrian and Phoenician art, although these were often in the context of hunts (Rostovtzeff 1943, 180). He then pointed out that Chinese art from the Han Dynasty sometimes depicted mounted archers doing the Parthian Shot (Rostovtzeff 1943, 185).

An ancient sculpture depicting the Parthian Shot

Rostovtzeff's analysis of the origins and influence of the Parthian Shot are interesting, but it should be approached with a bit of skepticism. In terms of the origins of the Parthian Shot, if the Assyrians or Phoenicians invented the maneuver, then it's only fair to wonder why the Parthians' immediate successors, the Achaemenids and Seleucids, were never known to use it. Both the Achaemenids and Seleucids employed cavalry and the descendants of the Assyrians in their armies, so it would stand to reason that they would have

used the Parthian Shot against their Greek and Roman enemies if they knew about it. Moreover, as Rostovtzeff pointed out, the Assyrian artistic depictions were of hunts, not warfare – an animal, perhaps confined, would prove to be a much easier target to do the Parthian Shot against then an enemy who is shooting back. Along those same lines, it is just as believable that the Parthians taught the maneuver to their Chinese trading partners. It is well known that the Silk Route was responsible for the movement of ideas, such as Buddhism and early Christianity, just as much as commodities, so it should not be surprising that the Parthians exported their unique military technique to Han China.

Parthian Religion



A Parthian votive relief

In the ancient world, the Parthians were among the best merchants and warriors, but what set them apart from others was their religion. The Parthians' religion was similar to many of the religions of their Near Eastern neighbors in that ritual played a key role, but it differed greatly in terms of theology. The Parthian view towards the various religions within their empire was essentially a continuation of that of their Achaemenid successors: religious toleration and non-interference.

The religion that the Parthians practiced themselves was an early form of

Zoroastrianism, which many argue is the oldest form of monotheism in the world. At the head of the Parthian religious order was a class of priests who carried out most of the religious rituals and formulated theological ideas. By all accounts, the priesthood was non-centralized and priests from each region exercised autonomy, so there was no Parthian-Zoroastrian religious hierarchy during the empire (Boyce 2001, 81).

The Parthian priesthood was probably inherited from the Achaemenid period, as were some other important aspects of the religion, but the Parthians also diverged from their successors in some important ways. For example, coinage was a general tradition that the Parthians took from the Achaemenids, but their use of religious iconography on the coins differed somewhat. The Achaemenids usually depicted their god, Ahura-Mazda, as a sun-disk, often with wings, on their coins and in other art in a way that was clearly influenced by earlier Egyptian and Mesopotamian artistic styles. Conversely, the Parthians typically depicted the divine in anthropomorphic style, which was more similar to the Hellenistic world (Boyce 2001, 82). This minor difference is probably indicative more of the Seleucids being the most immediate predecessors of the Parthians than any major theological shift, as other coins indicate that religious continuity from the Achaemenid through the Parthian dynasties was the rule.

Sacred fire altars were also common depictions on both Achaemenid and Parthian coins (Brosius 2010, 103). The depiction of sacred fire altars on coins appears to have become common about halfway through the Parthian Dynasty, during the reign of Vologases I (AD 51-80) (Colledge 1967, 51), and it was also during the reign of Vologases I that many of the books from the Zoroastrian holy scriptures known as the *Avesta* were first compiled (College 1967, 51).

The *Avesta* provides the modern reader with a glimpse into the theological motives that drove the Parthians, but the true essence of their religion was in the many arcane rituals that are still often misunderstood. The Parthians erected shrines, called *yazatas*, as sacred precincts where they believed Ahura-Mazada and some of the other lesser gods dwelled (Boyce 2001, 85). For the most part, they were similar to later Catholic shrines, but they were places of reverence more than ritual or worship, which was for the most part

confined to the Parthian fire temples.

The oldest descriptions of Zoroastrian fire temples and the oldest identified fire temples themselves come from the Parthian period (Boyce 2001, 86). The Parthian fire temples were located at a place known as the “Hill of the Master” in what is now southeastern Iran, which appears to have been the focal point for Parthian religious activity (Boyce 2001, 86). Sacred fires were where Zoroastrian rituals took place as they served as the earthly avatar of their god.

The importance of fire in Zoroastrian religion is demonstrated in both the theological texts and role it played in liturgical rituals (Clark 2001, 82). Fire gave both light and heat to Zarathustra/Zoroaster, the prophet of Zoroastrianism, as he spread his message across ancient Iran. To the Parthians, as well as modern Zoroastrians, fire embodied both divine and regal aspects and was therefore to be treated with reverence and respect. Devout Zoroastrians would never turn their back on a fire and would never place anything in a fire that might pollute its purity, especially waste matter and corpses (Clark 2001, 94).

There have been a number of sacred fires during the lifespan of Zoroastrianism but the three greatest ones – named Adur Buzen-Mihr, Adur Farnbag, and Adur Gushnasp – were installed either late in the Achaemenid Dynasty or early in the Parthian Dynasty (Boyce 2001, 87). To the Parthians, Adur Burzen-Mihr was the favored fire as it was established in Parthia proper (Boyce 2001, 88). The fire was placed in a temple, and, according to Parthian tradition, one of Zarathustra/Zoroaster’s followers, Vishtaspa, personally installed the fire in order to spread the new faith (Boyce 2001, 88).

Unfortunately, the Parthians wrote very little about their sacred fires, but Greek and Roman outsiders were impressed enough to write their own observations. An enigmatic Greek named Isidore of Charax wrote a journal of his travels along the Silk Route titled *The Parthian Stations*, and while most of the book concerns trade along the route, Isidore mentioned that a sacred fire was maintained where Arsaces, the founder of the Parthian Dynasty, first became king (Boyce 2001, 87). The earlier and better known 5th century BCE Greek historian Herodotus also wrote about sacred fires and the overall perception of Zoroastrianism to an outsider during the

Achaemenid period. “The following are certain Persian customs which I can describe from personal knowledge. The erection of statues, temples, and altars is not an accepted practice amongst them, and anyone who does such a thing is considered a fool, because, presumably, the Persian religion is not anthropomorphic like the Greek. Zeus, in their system, is the whole circle of the heavens, and they sacrifice to him from the tops of mountains. They also worship the sun, moon, and earth, fire, water, and winds, which are their only original deities.” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, I, 131). Herodotus followed the typical Greco-Roman convention of assigning the names of Greek and Roman deities to those he believed to be the foreign equivalent, so in this case Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon, was associated with the Zoroastrian Ahura-Mazda.

Rituals concerning fire were perhaps the most important in the religion of the Parthians, but the funerary rituals they practiced were probably the most foreign to outsiders. Purity was an important concept in Zoroastrian religion, and Zoroastrian priests conscientiously observed protocols concerning purity when tending to fires, which included separating corpses from fires. To Zoroastrians, corpses are the embodiment of impurity and should never be touched, which is an idea that was followed well before the Parthians. The Parthians, much like their Achaemenid ancestors, entombed their dead nobles, but the majority of practicing Zoroastrians during the Parthian period probably practiced corpse exposure (Boyce 2001, 90). The practice of corpse exposure simply involves placing the deceased’s corpse in an open area where vultures and dogs could devour the flesh and organs, after which the bones are then collected and placed in an ossuary (Boyce 2001, 90). This funerary ritual is still practiced today by the small Zoroastrian community in Mumbai, India (Clark 2001, 116), but it was mentioned briefly by the Roman historian Pempeius Trogus (Boyce 2001, 91).

A statue depicting a Parthian noble

Herodotus offered a more detailed description of the ritual from the Achaemenid period in his history. “There is another practice, however, concerning the burial of the dead, which is not spoken of openly and is something of a mystery: it is that a male Persian is never buried until the body has been torn by a bird or a dog. I know for certain that the Magi have this custom, for they are quite open about it. The Persians in general, however, cover a body with wax and then bury it. The Magi are a peculiar caste, quite different from the Egyptian priests and indeed from any other sort of person. The Egyptian priests make it an article of religion to kill no living creature except for sacrifice, but the Magi not only anything, except dogs and men, with their own hands but make a special point of doing so; ants, snakes, crawling animals, birds – no matter what, they kill them indiscriminately. Well, it is an ancient custom, do let them keep it.” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, I, 140).

As noted by Herodotus, the magi were a specific caste of Zoroastrians during the Achaemenid period that carried out most of the religious rituals, and according to this passage, they were the ones who started the practice of ritual corpse exposure, which by the Parthian period appears to have become the standard funerary ritual for most Zoroastrians.

Although rituals were an important aspect of Parthian religion, they were contingent upon the theology that was articulated in the *Avesta*. The *Avesta* is not just one single book, but is a collection of scriptures that were compiled over the period of several centuries, similar to the processes that established the Old Testament and the New Testament for the Bible. The Parthian contribution to the *Avesta* is a book known as the Vendidad, or "Law against the Demons," which was compiled during the reign of Vologases I, who was also known as Valakhsh (Boyce 2001, 93). The Vendidad is concerned primarily with rules about ritual purity and what one should do if defiled by an impurity. Theologically speaking, the Vendidad is quite clear on these matters, especially as it pertains to corpses. "No corpse which has been carried away by dogs, birds, wolves, winds, or flies, defiles a man. Were these corpses which have been carried away by dogs, birds, wolves, winds, or flies, to defile men, then would almost all my corporeal world be little allied to purity, but become Khraojdat-urva and Pesho-tanus; on account of the multitude of corpses which have perished on this earth. Creator! A man pours water over a corn-field; the water flows over this field for the second, for the third time; after the fourth time a dog, or a panther, or a wolf, brings a corpse into the field; what is the punishment for this? Then answered Ahura-Mazda: no corpse which the dogs, birds, wolves, winds, or flies, have brought defiles a man." (Vendidad, Fargad V).

Interestingly, the Parthians, as well as all believers in Zoroastrianism, revered dogs despite their task of eating the polluted corpses. The Parthians believed that dogs fulfilled a sacred duty, but they also believed burial grounds were impure for a period of time. The Vendidad reads, "How long must the earth be left uncultivated on which dogs and men die? Then answered Ahura-Mazda: a year long, O pure Zarathustra! Shall the land remain uncultivated on which dogs and men die. The Mazdayacnians shall not till this land; they shall not pour water on it within a year when dogs and men die upon it." (Vendidad, Fargad VI)

Thus, the Parthians were mandated to practice rituals pertaining to purity in their lives and deaths in a way that made them thrive spiritually within the temporal world. Zoroastrian theological ideas of purity went beyond rituals though and extended to all living creatures.

Zoroastrianism is sometimes referred to as a *dualistic* religion in that its adherents worship the pure god Ahura-Mazda but still recognize an evil and impure god named Angra-Mainyu. The Parthians extended the theological idea of opposites, or poles, to the natural world around them, as some plants and animals were good and pure while others were evil and impure. Dogs were good animals, but there were also a number of evil animals that Zoroastrians were required to avoid. The historian Plutarch, who lived during the existence of the Parthian Empire, wrote about this dualism in his book on eastern mythology, *Isis and Osiris*. "They believe that among plants too, some belong to the good god and others to the evil daemon, and that among animals some, such as dogs, birds and land hedgehogs, belong to the good god, whereas water-rats belong to the bad deity, and for this reason they regard as happy whoever kills a great number of them. But they (the Persians) also relate many mythical details about the gods." (Boyce 1990, 108-9)

The idea of theological poles was also manifested in two important Persian words: *asha* and *drug*, which mean "truth" and "lie" respectively (Clark 2001, 5; 9). In Parthian-Zoroastrian theology, *asha* was associated with everything that was good and pure, while *drug* consisted of everything that was impure and evil.

The Parthians' strong religious beliefs also extended into their ideas of kingship to create an ideal that was most unique, even in the ancient Near East. Most of the peoples of the ancient Near East viewed their kings as either divine (such as Egypt) or as inspired and appointed by the divine, as in Mesopotamia. The Parthian view of kingship was closer to that practiced in Mesopotamia, but it was also different in many significant ways.

The concept of Parthian kingship, like Parthian religion in general, was essentially an extension of Achaemenid Persian kingship. As such, the king was believed to be the mortal vessel of Ahura Mazda, and it was his job to carry out the proper rituals and maintain purity throughout the temporal

kingdom. In that vein, the Parthians seem to have followed the Achaemenids in crafting legends that validated and legitimized their dynasty; for example, the Parthians priests created a legend that stated that Arsaces, the first Parthian king, had six nobles who helped him take the throne. The legend shows another string of cultural continuity from the Achaemenid to the Parthian dynasty because the Achaemenids recognized six great Persian families in their empire. The number six is also theologically significant in Zoroastrianism because Ahura Mazda was attended to by six demigods in heaven (Boyce 2001, 87).

One of the more unique aspects of Achaemenid kingship that the Parthians followed was the practice of *khavaetvadatha*, or incestuous royal marriage (Boyce 2001, 97). The marriages included brother-sister, mother-son, and father-daughter pairings, and although there was no express endorsement of it in Zoroastrian theology, its practice no doubt comes from the concepts of purity inherent in Zoroastrianism. In a Greek document, Arsaces I was said to be married to his sister (Boyce 2001, 97), but the practice was only given a detailed account by Herodotus of the Achaemenid king Cambyses. According to Herodotus, the tradition began with the Achaemenids. “This woman was his sister by both parents, and also his wife, though it had never been a Persian custom for brothers and sisters to marry. . . He summoned the royal judges and asked them if there was any law in the country which allowed a man to marry his sister if he wished to do so. . . They could discover no law which allowed brother to marry sister, there was undoubtedly a law which permitted the king of Persia to do what he pleased. . . Cambyses accordingly married the sister he was in love with, and not long afterwards married another one as well – and this, the younger of the two, was the one who went with him to Egypt.” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, III, 31).

Although most elements of Parthian religion and kingship appear to have been inherited from the Achaemenids, there were some aspects that were either native Parthian or came from elsewhere. The Parthians were culturally Persian and followed many of the traditions of their Achaemenid ancestors, but they originated from different tribes than the Achaemenids and were also influenced by other non-Persian peoples. Unlike the Achaemenids, the Parthians had extensive knowledge of and contact with different peoples in East Asia and they also were more influenced by the Greeks than the

Achaemenids were. It has already been mentioned that Parthian coins followed the Hellenistic Seleucid style more than the Achaemenid, which is another source that depicts the Parthian concept of kingship. Some Parthian coins refer to the king as the “Brother of the Sun and Moon”, which may be a reference to Ahura Mazda as the sun, but it could also be a reference to a pre-Zoroastrian nomadic deity (Colledge 1967, 103). The Parthians more than likely carried some elements of their pre-Zoroastrian religion with them into Persia, but for the most part they practiced a religion that was almost the same as the Achaemenids before and the Sassanids after them.

Religion clearly played an important role in Parthian culture, but their religion also influenced others. One of the more interesting aspects of Roman and Parthian history that continues to puzzle scholars is the nature of the Mithras cult and its potential origin in Persia. The Mithras cult was one of the many “mystery religions” that the Romans adopted, several of which came from cultures outside of Rome. Isis, an Egyptian goddess, and Cybele, an Anatolian goddess, were both popular with Roman women, while Mithras, which was a variation of the name of the Zoroastrian demigod Mithra, was popular with Roman soldiers and the political elite for over 400 years (Clark 2001, 157).

Since the Mithras cult, like all of the Roman mystery cult, were esoteric in nature, the exact nature of the influence the Parthians had on the cult remains unknown, but some archaeological evidence has led modern scholars to make educated deductions. Some believe that the conscription of Persian soldiers into the Roman army and continued contact between the Parthian and Romans led to some members of the ever eclectic Roman society adopting the cult directly from Parthian/Zoroastrian religion (Clark 2001, 157). This seems like the most plausible explanation, but others have argued that the Mithras cult was actually a Roman religion that was given a Parthian façade to make it appear more exotic in order to attract Romans who were enthralled with eastern spirituality (Clark 2001, 157).

The best evidence to determine the origins of the Mithras cult can be found in the many temples throughout Europe that the Romans erected to the god. Mithras temples, known as *mithraea*, were subterranean chambers where the secret rituals of the cult took place (Clark 2001, 158). The best evidence from

extant mithraea are the reliefs on the altars, which depict a graphic mythological story. The altar reliefs usually depict the god/hero Mithra slaughtering a bull and often accompanied by a leaping dog (Clark 2001, 158). The references to Zoroastrian theology are unmistakable; the bull slaughter is similar to an account from a Zoroastrian text (the *Bundahishen*), while dogs were viewed as *asha* animals in Zoroastrian theology and an important part of the funerary ritual (Clark 2001, 158). The detailed iconography on the Mithras altars suggests that the inventors of the Mithras cult had more than just a superficial knowledge of Zoroastrianism, which in turn indicates a provenance of the religion somewhere in Persian or Parthia.

Of course, if the Mithras cult began as a Roman interpretation of some elements of Zoroastrian theology then new questions are raised. Perhaps the most obvious question regards why the Romans would adopt one of their biggest enemies' gods. The answer to this question may never be revealed, but the fact that the Romans worshiped Mithra demonstrates the strength and vitality of Parthian culture. The numerous Roman-Parthian wars for the most part ended in stalemate with the borders, aside from Armenia, rarely changed, and both sides were weakened by internal problems; but there was clearly enough contact between the two to have their cultural concepts cross into the two empires.

A Mithraic relief from Ancient Rome

The Decline of the Parthian Empire

The exportation of Mithra to the west was one of Parthia's last great triumphs, because even as numerous Romans worshiped the Zoroastrian deity in underground chambers, the Parthian Empire was falling apart. As Rome entered into its precipitous decline in the 3rd century CE, so did its erstwhile enemy; but the end of the Parthian Empire was much more abrupt.

Although the Parthian dynasty ended quickly and is usually attributed to the last king of the dynasty, Vologases VI (207-228), numerous factors contributed to make the decline a foregone conclusion. The Antonine Plague of 165-180 CE proved to be an especially devastating illness to the Roman army in the east, but it was equally devastating to the civilian population of Europe once the soldiers returned home. All of the sources that describe the plagues' effects and extent are Roman, so it is unknown what effect the plague had on Parthia, but one can assume that it affected the Parthians equally. The plague ravaged Europe during the reign of the Parthian king Vologases IV (148-192), who is not known to have conducted any major campaigns, an indication that the Parthians also suffered from the plague. It stands to reason that given the centuries of animosity built up between the Romans and Parthians, if an opportunity made possible by the plague presented itself to the Parthians, they would have taken advantage of it by campaigning against the Romans.

The Parthians were almost certainly adversely affected by the Antonine Plague, but that alone would not have undone the empire. Perhaps the greatest external problems that the Parthians encountered were primarily those of their own creation: constant wars and conflicts with other peoples. The numerous Roman-Parthian wars are known to have been a drain on the Roman economy, and one can only imagine that a similar situation took hold in Parthia. As the Parthians fought the Romans for control of Mesopotamia and Armenia, they neglected their trade routes and other peoples, such as Kushan, grew stronger. For the most part, the Romans were never an existential threat to the Parthians, but when the Parthians focused most of their resources on western campaigns, they invited rebellion and instability into their empire.

Much of the instability would come within the Parthian nobility and the royal line. From the beginning of the Parthian dynasty, there were always pretenders to the throne, many of whom were supported by the Romans, but it was not until later in the dynasty that it became a problem. Questions and claims concerning royal succession in the later Parthian dynasty led to some apparent and tangible problems, such as assassinations and multiple claims to the throne. Osroes and Vologases III both claimed the Parthian throne simultaneously, as did Vologases VI and Artabanus IV (Brosius 2010, 202).

Naturally, as the Parthian Empire grew weaker, the problems of succession and pretenders to the throne became amplified, to the point that they were no longer minor problems that could be ignored but existential issues that the Parthian kings could no longer effectively handle.

The chaotic political situation in the late Parthian Empire was just a reflection on the nature of the Parthian Empire itself, as it was one without a true national or central character. Though the Parthians followed a governmental system similar to that of the Seleucids and Achaemenids before them, the power of the Parthian central government was considerably weaker, and while the Parthians continued the satrapal system of their predecessors, they also allowed certain regions to retain their own kings as long as they supplied taxes and/or men for the Parthian military. Such a system could work well in times of peace and internal stability, but once the Parthian dynasty began to turn on itself, it also quickly lost control of its semi-autonomous kingdoms.

The Parthians also never demonstrated the kind of propaganda abilities of the Achaemenids when it came to advertising their power within the empire. The Achaemenid Persians were masters of ancient propaganda, and they depicted themselves as legitimate rulers on the temples and monuments of the peoples they conquered. The Achaemenids left their political mark on the temples of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia in order to advertise their power to their new subjects. Although it is nearly impossible to determine how effective such measures were, it no doubt implanted an indelible mark in the minds of their subjects and served as a constant reminder of who wielded the power and central authority within the empire. The Parthians on the other hand left little evidence of their control in the lands of their subject peoples, so it’s safe to assume that whenever the royal succession problems intensified, subjects furthest from Parthia thought little of who was in control.

As the situation grew more difficult within the Parthian dynasty, a new Persian dynasty rose in its place. In 224, Ardashir of Persis was proclaimed king of the Sassanid dynasty, which began a new era in the history of Persia (Colledge 1967, 173). Vologases VI may have survived nominally as king until 227, but Ardashir’s accession is considered by most scholars to be the terminal point of the Parthian dynasty and empire. Since the Parthians were a

Persian dynasty and not necessarily an ethnic group themselves, they continued to live in the Parthian heartland, but without the power they wielded for centuries. The Parthian dynasty may have collapsed, but vital elements of their culture continued on for centuries under the Sassanids. Most importantly the Sassanids continued the Zoroastrian religious tradition and continued tending to the sacred fires until the advent of Islam.

Early Sasanian History

The Sasanian Dynasty began in the hills of what is now southern Iran in the region known as Persis. From their city of Istakhr, the Sasanians had easy access to all of the Achaemenid monuments (Brosius 2010, 139), and although they could not read the cuneiform inscriptions on the monuments, the predecessors seemed to have given the early Sasanian kings and nobles not just a link to Persia's glorious past, but also something around which they could rally.

As the Sasanian nobles watched the Parthian Dynasty collapse before their eyes in the 3rd century CE, they decided to make their move. The first true Sasanian king and progenitor of the Sasanian Dynasty was Ardashir I (224-239/40), but interestingly, the dynasty took its name from a man named Sasan, who was the guardian of the sacred fire in the Anahita sanctuary at Istakhr (Brosius 2010, 139). It may seem surprising that the Sasanians were not named for their first, warlike king, but a closer look at the situation reveals it was actually quite logical. First, Sasanian kings were generally very pious Zoroastrians, so any individual associated with one of their sacred fires would be afforded an exceptionally high place in their culture. Second, the process placing Ardashir I in the position to defeat the Parthians was actually a very long one, and if anything, his rise represented the final step. The Sasanians slowly defeated their neighbors in an east to west direction while staying under the radar of their Parthian overlords (Brosius 2010, 140).

Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.'s picture of a coin depicting Ardashir I

When Ardashir I proclaimed the Sasanian dynasty as the legitimate rulers of Persia, Parthian King Artabanus V would not hand the crown over willingly. According to the early 3rd century Roman historian Cassius Dio, Ardashir I and Artabanus V fought at least three battles for the throne of Persia. The defining battle came at Hormuzjan in the region of Media on April 28, 224, where Artabanus V (213-224) died on the battlefield and Ardashir I proclaimed himself "King of Kings," following standard Near Eastern royal nomenclature (Brosius 2010, 14).

Dio wrote that after defeating Artabanus V, Ardashir I, whom he referred to as "Artaxerxes," attempted to wrest all of Mesopotamia and Armenia away from the Romans. "But the situation in Mesopotamia became still more alarming and inspired a more genuine fear in all, not merely the people in Rome, but the rest of mankind as well. For Artaxerxes, a Persian, after conquering the Parthians in three battles and killing their king, Artabanus, made a campaign against Hatra, in the endeavor to capture it as a base for attacking the Romans. He actually did make a breach in the wall, but when he

lost a good many soldiers through an ambuscade, he moved against Media. Of this country, as also of Parthia, he acquired no small portion, partly by force and partly by intimidation, and then marched against Armenia. Here he suffered a reverse at the hands of the natives, some Medes, and the sons of Artabanus, and either fled, as some say, or, as others assert, retired to prepare a larger expedition. He accordingly became a source of fear to us; for he was encamped with a large army so as to threaten not only Mesopotamia but also Syria, and he boasted that he would win back everything that the ancient Persians had once held, as far as the Grecian Sea, claiming that all this was his rightful inheritance from his forefathers." (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXX, 3-4).

Almost as soon as he had been proclaimed king, Ardashir I initiated a policy of martial continuity with the Achaemenid Persians by engaging in open hostility with the Romans, who had inherited Hellenic culture from the Greeks. In order to be effective in their campaigns against the Romans, Ardashir I knew he had to rebuild the army, and for this, he followed Parthian precedent by placing the cavalry at the apex of his army, with both light and heavy units (Brosius 2010, 186). Cavalry had long been a tradition in Persia, dating back to the Achaemenids, but it was the Parthians who had truly raised cavalry tactics to the next level with their famed "Parthian shot." This tactic essentially saw horseback archers firing as they retreated, and the Sasanians learned to follow these military traditions quite effectively.

Ardashir I knew that if his dynasty was to last as long as the Achaemenid, he would have to also take the Parthian Dynasty into consideration and try to establish further strings of continuity. Besides organizing the Sasanian military along the Parthian model, Ardashir I also made the Parthian-Mesopotamian city of Ctesiphon a Sasanian capital. After taking control of Ctesiphon, Ardashir I had himself proclaimed king in a formal ceremony in the city, thereby establishing a clear line of continuity from the Parthian Dynasty to the Sasanian Dynasty (Brosius 2010, 142).

Sahand Ace's picture of a Sassanid relief depicting Ardashir I receiving the ring of kingship

Once the king had been safely ensconced in his seat of power, he was free to dedicate his time to cultural pursuits that made the Sasanians unique and powerful at the same time. Although Ardashir I followed many of the cultural precedents set by his Achaemenid and Parthian predecessors, he also established some norms that were different and thus represented Sasanian culture.

By all accounts, the Sasanians maintained a very religious dynasty, more so than their predecessors, as nearly everything they did—including their wars with the Romans and Byzantines—revolved around religion. One of the most unusual religious practices introduced by Ardashir I that was followed by many of his successors was *kvedodah*—the practice of royal incestuous marriage. The Sasanians were not the first people in the world to practice royal incestuous marriage—the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt had done so more than 200 years prior—but the Sasanians had given the practice religious legitimacy. Ardashir I was the first king of the dynasty to practice *kevedodah*

when he married his paternal half-sister, Denk (Boyce 2001, 111).

Although the practice was associated with Zoroastrianism, there are no direct references to the practice in any Zoroastrian text, which has left many modern scholars at pains to find its theological origins. There are also few historical texts that mention the practice. One of the earliest non-Sasanians to mention the practice was 7th century Coptic Bishop John of Nikiu, who references it in an anachronistic historical account of Persia. “And after the death of Belus, Ninus his father’s brother reigned over Assyria. He married Semiramis his mother and made her his wife, and established this impure custom and transmitted it to his successors: and they are designated by this evil name till the present day. This conduct does not create a scandal amongst the Persians; for they take to wife their mothers and sisters and daughters.” (Charles 2007, 18).

Among the Sasanian sources, only a few such marriages are attested (Brosius 2010, 173), but an inscription left by Zoroastrian High-Priest Kirider, who had served under several Sasanian kings after Ardashir I, mentions the practice in a religious context. The text states, "And with the support of the yazads and the King of kings, and by my act, many Vahram Fires were founded in the land of Iran, and many next-of-kin marriages were made.” (Boyce 1990, 113).

Establishing the practice of *khvedodah* was certainly one of Ardahsir I’s more interesting religious policies, but the aggressive king enacted other ideas promoting Zoroastrianism and connecting the Sasanians with their illustrious Achaemenid ancestors.

Ardashir I’s promotion of Zoroastrian ideals throughout his kingdom was primarily carried out by the high-priest of the religion, known as the *herbad,* whose responsibility it was to see that the sacred fires were burning and Zoroastrian laws were being followed. Tansar was the herbad under Ardashir I and into Shapur I's reign (239/40-270/2). A letter written by Tansar details some religious policies carried out by Ardahsir I: “Long afterwards Ardashir son of Papak, son of Sasan, took the field...Apart from Ardavan, the man of most might and dignity at the time was Gushnasp, king of Parishwar and Tabaristan…When it became clear to Gushnasp that he could not avoid submitting and paying fealty, he wrote a letter to Tansar, chief herbad of

Ardashir son of Papak. Tansar read the letter…and wrote the answer which follows: The chief herbad, Tansar, has received the letter of Gushnasp, prince and king of Tabaristan and Parishwar…He has studied each point, good and bad, and is pleased with it…In the beginning of time men enjoyed perfect understanding of the knowledge of religion…Yet it is not to be doubted that even then, through new happenings in their midst, they had need of a ruler of understanding; for till religion is interpreted by understanding by understanding it has no firm foundation…Punishments, you must know, are for three kinds of transgressions; first that of the creature against his God… when he turns from the faith and introduces a heresy into religion…For (this) the King of kings has established a law far better than that of the ancients. For in former days any man who turned from the faith was swiftly… put to death…The King of kings has ordered that such a man should be imprisoned, and that for the space of a year learned men should summon him at frequent intervals and advise him and lay arguments before him and destroy his doubts. If he become penitent and contrite and seek pardon of God, he is set free. If obstinacy and pride hold him back, then he is put to death…The truth is that after Darius (III) each of the 'kings of the peoples' [i.e. the Parthians' vassal kings] built his own [dynastic] fire temple. This was pure innovation, introduced by them without the authority of king of old. The King of kings has razed the temples, and confiscated the endowments, and had the fires carried back to their places of origin…In the space of fourteen years…he thus brought it about that he made water flow in every desert and established towns and crated groups of villages…Good order in the affairs of the people affects him more than the welfare of his own body and soul. Whoever considers his achievements…will agree that since the power of the world's Creator arched this azure sphere the world has not known so true a king." (Boyce 1990, 109-10)

The letter also relates Sasanian knowledge of earlier Persian dynasties by making mention of Darius (the Achaemenid emperor who led the First Persian War against the Greeks), demonstrating the importance Sasanians placed on both the past and religion. Ardashir I and the other early Sasanian kings also physically linked their dynasty to the Achaemenids by leaving inscriptions near Achaemenid monuments at Naqsh-I Rustam (Brosius 2010, 162).

Although there is no evidence the Sasanians were genealogically connected to the Achaemenids, they apparently felt the need to connect to the older dynasty in order to legitimize their rule in Persia. The policy was successful for the most part, as rebellions were extremely rare during the empire's first few centuries in power.

When Ardashir I died, the Sasanian crown passed peacefully and uneventfully to his son, Shapur I. The young king carried on the policies of his father during his long rule, promoting Zoroastrianism and fighting the Romans in Mesopotamia. Shapur I defeated the young Roman Emperor Gordian III (238-244) in Mesopotamia in 243 (Brosius 2010, 144). Not content with just one victory over the Romans, Shapur I pushed further east, taking cities in Syria from the Romans in 256 and 260. Shapur I proved so effective on the field of battle, at least against the Romans, that he was able to capture the Emperor Valerian (253-260), which set a new low for the Romans as it was the first time one of their emperors had been captured (Brosius 2010, 145).

Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.'s picture of a coin depicting Shapur I

When Shapur I was not fighting the Romans for control of Mesopotamia, he was following and adding to many of the religious policies his father had established. Shapur I continued the tradition of khvedodah by marrying his sister, Anahid (Boyce 2001, 111). He also continued to leave inscriptions near the Achaemenid monuments at Naqsh-I Rustam. In particular, an

Achaemenid era tower became the favorite place for Shapur I and other Sasanian kings, who left several inscriptions there. Known to the locals as the Ka'ba of Zardusht, the inscriptions are usually in three languages: Parthian, Middle Persian, and Greek (Brosius 2010, 145). The multilingual facet of the inscriptions was another Achaemenid tradition continued by the Sasanians, although the Achaemenid inscriptions employed the cuneiform script in the languages of Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite.

One of Shapur I's inscriptions from the Ka'ba of Zardusht states that he is the king of all Iran, descended from the yazads, Zoroastrian angels, or demigods. The inscription states, "I, Lord Shabuhr, Mazda-worshipper, King of kings of Iran and non-Iran, whose race is of the yazads…And because with the help of the yazads we sought out and conquered these so many lands, there we have founded in each region many Vahram Fires, and have acted benevolently towards many priests, and have exalted the affairs of the yazads…Then even as we now are diligent in the affairs and service of the yazads, and are (ourselves) the domain of the yazads, and even as we with the help of the yazads sought out and conquered these lands, and achieved deeds of fame and courage, so let him also who shall be ruler after us be of good service and good intent towards the yazads, so that the yazads may be his friends as they have been ours." (Boyce 1990, 111)

Perhaps one of the most important domestic developments taking place during Shapur I's rule was the elevation of a man named Kirdir to the position of high-priest of the Zoroastrian religion. The first mention of Kirdir in any Sasanian text is dated to the reign of Shapur I (Sprengling 1940, 202), but it was during the reign of Bahram I (273-276) that the high-priest made his presence known throughout Persia. Historians believe that although Kirdir may have been important religiously during Shapur I's rule, he asserted himself politically after helping make Bahram I the Sasanian king (Brosius 2010, 147). A commoner by birth, Kirdir left many inscriptions in Middle Persian throughout Persia, which has helped scholars learn more about this ancient holy man (Boyce 2001, 109). It is known that he accompanied kings he served under on military expeditions against Rome (Boyce 2001, 110), and he is credited with following Tansar's theological justification of the practice of khvedodah (Boyce 2001, 111).

As Kirdir promoted Zoroastrianism virtues within the realm, he began to see more and more theological enemies who needed to be extricated from the land. When compared to other religions, Zoroastrianism usually defies most definitions, often ending up in a category by itself, and it is important to consider its place among other religions to understand why Kirdir led the persecution of non-Zoroastrians in Persia. Although Zoroastrianism is a revealed religion like Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, it was not a universal religion like the others because its adherents rarely proselytized the faith. The result was that nearly all Zoroastrians lived within the realm of the Sasanian Empire and most were ethnic Persians. It was also not a true "ethnic" religion like Judaism either; while nearly all of the followers of Zoroastrianism were Persians, nearly anyone could convert to the religion, meaning there were also followers from places far away from Persia. At first glance, it appears that Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion, but a further examination demonstrates it is not. And while the Persians never seemed concerned with proselytizing their faith to non-Persians, more than one Sasanian king and several high-priests, such as Kirdir, believed Zoroastrianism should be the only religion within the realm.

Kirdir was responsible for persecuting nearly every non-Zoroastrian religion within Persia, but he seemed to have a special distaste for the Manicheans, despite (or because of) the fact Manicheism was similar to Zoroastrianism in many ways. Manicheism was a revealed religion, started by a prophet named Mani, and its core theology held that the world was dualistic, thereby divided by good and evil. Although these basic ideals coincided with Zoroastrianism, Mani also preached that believers should lead an ascetic life, which was at odds with the worldly philosophy of Zoroastrianism (Boyce 2001, 111). The theological conflict resulted in Mani being imprisoned in the Sasanian capital, where he died in 276 (Brosius 2010, 147).

Kirdir believed that persecuting non-Zoroastrians was the right thing to do and proudly proclaimed so in an inscription on the Ka'ba Zardusht. It states, "And Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians and Baptisers and Manichaeans were assailed in the land. And images were overthrown, and the dens of demons were [thus] destroyed, and the places and abodes of the yazads [i.e. fire temples] were established."

(Boyce 1990, 112).

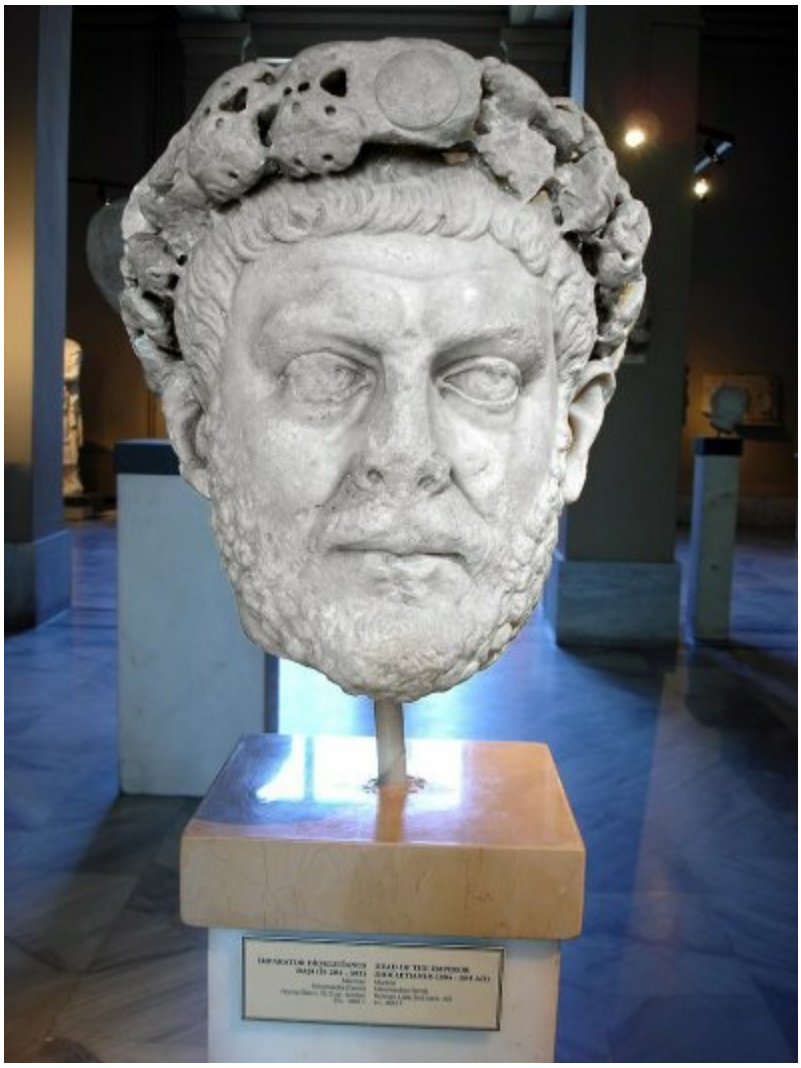
After Kirdir's death, the persecution of non-Zoroastrians in Persia subsided, as the next few Sasanian kings had to contend with a revitalized Rome led by two of its greatest later emperors, Diocletian (284-305) and Constantine the Great (306-327). As Rome struggled with its failing economy in the early 3rd century, the Sasanian kings took the opportunity to slowly chip away at Roman lands in the east. Mesopotamia had always been a battlefield between the Romans and Persians, but the Sasanians thought the Roman client kingdom of Armenia was ripe for conquest.

Thus, Sasanian King Narseh (ruled 293-302) decided to try his luck against the Romans and Diocletian, their emperor, around the year 295, initiating an offensive against Rome by attacking Armenia and heading south to Mesopotamia. The campaign in Mesopotamia ended well for Narseh, as the Roman commander led his troops in a haphazard attack the Sasanians quickly cut down. The Roman Emperor Julian (355-363) wrote of the events in a panegyric dedicated to Constantine the Great: "Did not the Caesar incur a disgraceful defeat when he attacked them on his own account? It was not till the ruler of the whole world turned his attention to them, directing thither all the forces of the empire, occupying all the passes with his troops and levies of hoplites, both veteran and new recruits, and employing every sort of military equipments, that fear drove them to accept terms of peace." (Julian, *Panegyric in Honour of Constantius*, 18)

Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.'s picture of a coin depicting Emperor Julian

The Romans subsequently reinforced their forces and held the Syrian city of Nisbis, which Narseh promptly besieged. The siege of Nisbis proved to be a turning point in the war. Julian wrote, "But the Persians ever since the last campaign had been watching for just such an opportunity, and had planned to conquer Syria, by a single invasion. So they mustered all forces, every age, sex, and condition, and marched against us, men and mere boys, old men and crowds of women and slaves, who followed not merely to assist in the war, but in vast numbers beyond what was needed…But the magnitude of your preparations made it manifest that their expectations were but vanity. They began the siege and completely surrounded the city with dykes, and then the river Mygdonius flowed in and flooded the ground about the walls, as they say the Nile floods Egypt. The siege-engines were brought up against the ramparts on boats, and their plan was that one force should sail to attack the walls while the other kept shooting on the city's defenders from the mounds…After spending four months, he retreated with an army that had lost many thousands, and he how had always seemed to be irresistible was glad to keep the peace, and to use as a bulwark for his own safety the fact that you had no time to spare and that our own affairs were in confusion." (Julian, *Panegyric in Honour of Constantius*, 26-28)

Narseh was forced to accept Diocletian's peace in the year 298, which conceded all Sasanian land west of the Tigris River to Rome (Brosius 2010, 148). The Sasanians were beaten in the west, but not quite defeated. Theirs was still a new and vigorous dynasty and empire in 298, while Rome was rotting from internal problems.



G. Dallorto's picture of a bust of Diocletian

When Narseh's grandson, Shapur II (309-379), came to the Sasanian throne, he was only an infant (Boyce 2001, 118). It was during Shapur II's rule when the nobles became much more powerful, to the point that they would eventually choose several of the later Sasanian kings. As the young king learned the arts of diplomacy and war early in his reign, Constantine the Great made overtures of peace toward Persia, and Rome and Persia experienced a period of extended peace until he died in 337, which essentially erased the agreements he had made with the Sasanians (Brosius 2010, 149).

Jean-Christophe Benoist's picture of an ancient bust of Constantine the Great

Perhaps sensing that Constantine's successors were nowhere near his capabilities, or possibly impelled by the nobles, Shapur II renewed hostilities with Rome over Armenia and Mesopotamia. Shapur II returned to Nisibis to finish what his grandfather had started, but he was stymied by the city's defenses on three separate occasions in 338, 346, and 350 (Brosius 2010, 149).

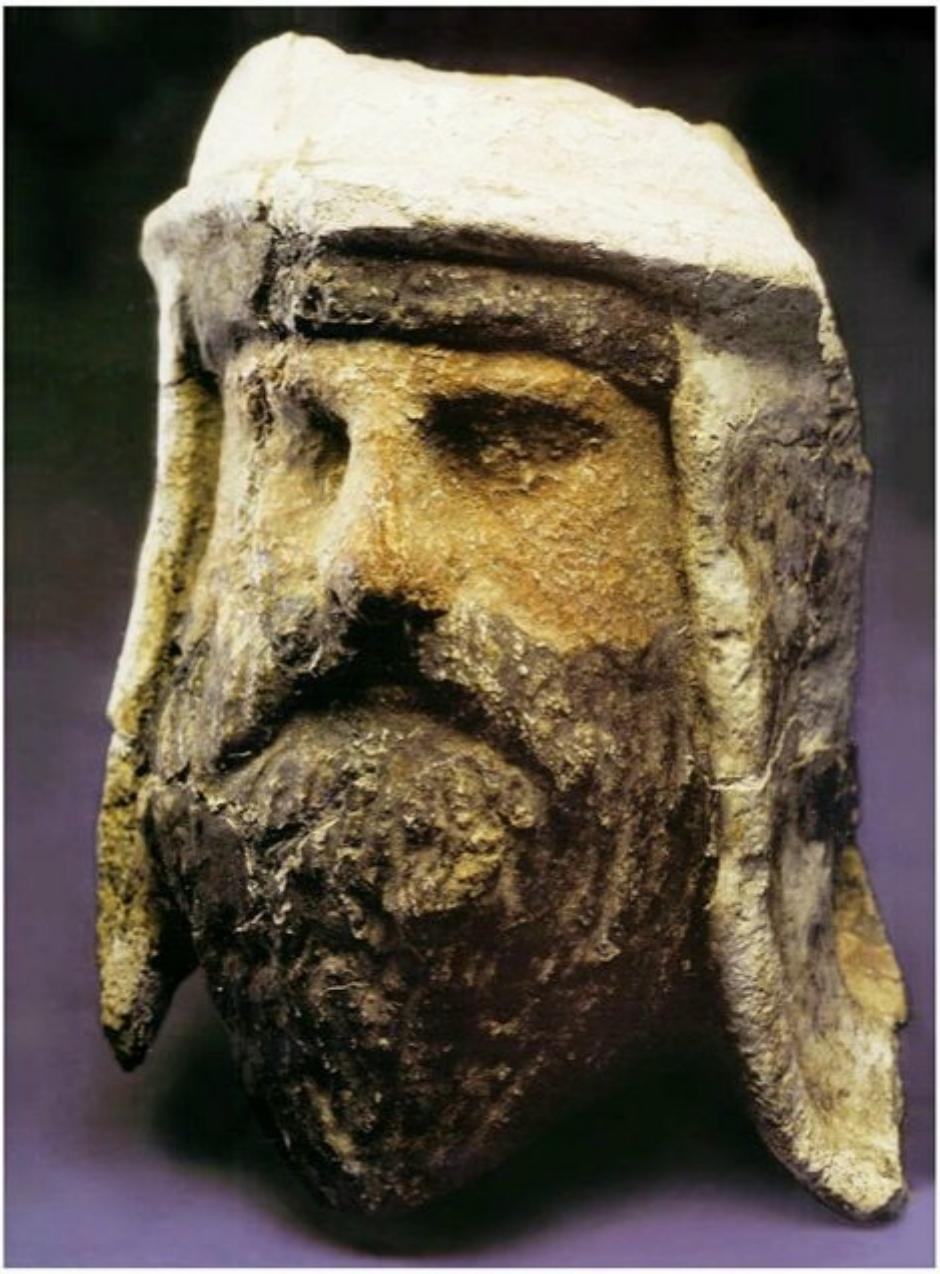
Though the reasons for Shapur II's failures in Mesopotamia are not clear, it was probably due to a combination of the king's lack of leadership abilities and the fact that the Sasanians were being assailed from multiple directions. Various nomadic hordes, some of which were related to the Huns who had attacked Rome, made several incursions into Sasanian territory from the southern, eastern, and northern borders during Shapur II's reign (Brosius 2010, 151).

In terms of Shapur II's lack of leadership skills, what the primary sources do not say is perhaps just as telling as what it recorded. Unlike most of his predecessors, Shapur II left no major monumental inscriptions. It is not known why he did not add his name to the Ka'ab Zardusht, but it may have to do with his preoccupation with Mesopotamia and Armenia. In his quest to win those lands, Shapur II simply neglected his domestic duties, but at the same time, his lack of monumental inscriptions seemingly set a sort of precedent because most of the latter Sasanian kings followed suit by not leaving inscriptions either (Boyce 2001, 118).

Although the king left no Persian-language inscriptions detailing his domestic policies, a number of non-Sasanian sources have survived that paint the picture of an anti-Christian zealot whose actions would have made Kirdir blush. Constantine the Great is remembered for many things, but perhaps none more than his decision to end the persecution of the Christians. Although the emperor was only baptized on his deathbed, his efforts to legalize Christianity across the Roman Empire effectively made Rome a Christian kingdom. Shapur II began the persecution of Christians in 322 (Boyce 2001, 119), but he accelerated the process after Constantine died and war resumed with Rome. To Shapur II and an increasing number of Sasanians, Christianity became synonymous with Rome. All Christian sects, even ones birthed far from Europe, were seen by the Sasanians as anathema to their civilization, with its followers viewed as a potential fifth column.

The anti-Christian persecution continued for the remainder of Shapur II's rule, only subsiding in the chaos that followed. After Shapur II, three kings ruled for a total of 20 years. The nobility exercised immense power during this period, deposing and even assassinating kings who did not do as they were told (Brosius 2010, 151).

Sassanian Religion



A clay head depicting a Zoroastrian priest

More important than the numerous wars fought by the Sasanians against Rome for control over Mesopotamia was the religion they followed and promoted. As noted above, the Sasanians were ardent followers of the Zoroastrian religion, which, like the Abrahamic religions, is a revealed faith with a prophet and holy books but not necessarily a universal religion. It is believed that a form of Zoroastrianism was practiced as far back as the Achaemenid Dynasty and refined, to a certain extent, under the Parthians, but

it was under the Sasanians that the religion became fully articulated in writing. Nearly all of the Sasanian kings who left significant historical records behind professed to be pious followers of the faith.

The Sasanian kings did whatever they could to promote Zoroastrianism, to the point of making it a state religion, so it is necessary to understand the historical and theological background of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism was established in Persia through the preaching of the prophet known as Zoroaster or Zarathustra. Unfortunately, there is no consensus among historians concerning when Zarathustra lived and disseminated his message, with some believing him to have lived as early as 2000 BCE, while others have argued he did not live until the Achaemenid period. The latter argument is disregarded by most scholars since the Achaemenids made numerous mentions of Ahura Mazda in their monumental texts, which means they were already practicing Zoroastrians, or at least, practicing proto-Zoroastrians, by the 6th century BCE. Based on the available evidence, it seems logical to believe that Zarathustra lived sometime between 1500 BCE and the early 6th century BCE (Malandra 1983, 16), which would have made him a contemporary of Aryan-Vedic India society and a potential contemporary of the early Achaemenid kings.

Whenever Zarathustra walked along the hills of Persia, it cannot be denied that his new religion had an immense impact on the people. The new religion was a combination of rituals not so different than those practiced by Aryans in northern India and a new set of morality codes that had been designed to uplift the Persian people. Zoroastrianism is often referred to as a monotheistic religion and possibly an influence on early Christianity, but such claims are a bit simplistic and often misleading. The message Zarathustra preached can best be described as dualism; he taught that for all of the evil in the world, there was a corresponding good, and the two were constantly at war. Zoroastrianism held there were, in fact, many gods and demigods, but Ahura Mazda—also referred to as Ohrmazd—was the supreme creator and solar god who was almost exclusively worshipped. At the opposite spectrum was Angramainyu, or Arhriman, who was similar to the Christian devil in many ways. Along with the two primary gods were countless other gods or demigods, divided into camps of good and evil. The yazads were similar to angels, and some, such as Mithra, were revered to the point of worship, while

the devs were demons that worked in concert with Angramainyu (Malandra 1983, 19).

The Zoroastrian religious book, the *Avesta*, contains a passage where Ahura Mazda explains this dualism to Zarathustra:

> "Ahura-Mazda spake to the holy Zarathustra.
>
> I created, O holy Zarathustra, a place, a Creation of delight, [but] nowhere was created a possibility [of approach].
>
> For had I not, O holy Zarathustra, created a place, a creation of delight, where nowhere was created a possibility.
>
> The whole corporeal world would have gone after Airyana-vashja [A place, a Creation of delight, not so delightful as the first (have I created); the second, an opposition of the same—one destroying men (Has Angra-mainyu created)]." (Bleeck 2005, I, 3)

A relief depicting Ahura Mazda giving the ring of kingship to Shapur II while Mithra stands behind the emperor

Although this theology had been in existence long before the Sasanians came to power, it was during their rule that the *Avesta* was first put into writing. Like the Bible, the *Avesta* is comprised of several different books that had been recited orally for generations before being put into writing at different times. Specifically, the *Avesta* is comprised of 21 "divisions" known as *nasks* (Malandra 1983, 26), which are further divided thematically. The sections known as the "Gathas" are Zoroastrian songs. The "Yashts" are also songs, but they are dedicated to specific Zoroastrian gods. The "Vendidad" is a collection of verses that concern laws, which is where many of the Zoroastrian ideas about fire and purity are articulated, as well as pseudo-history and myths, many of them cosmological in nature (Malandra 1983, 27).

The complete *Avesta* is written in a form of the Persian language generally referred to by modern scholars as "Avestan," but there were other Zoroastrian religious texts written in Middle Persian. The Middle Persian texts, known as the "Zand" or "Zend," were essentially translations of the *Avesta*, so they are often referred to as the "Zend-Avesta," but they are not considered as authoritative as the true *Avesta* (Boyce 2001, 113).

Since the *Avesta* originated as a series of oral traditions, it is difficult to pinpoint when it was first composed. Grammatical studies have suggested that the earliest portions of the *Avesta*, known as the "Old *Avesta*," were first uttered around 1200 BCE (which would seem to confirm that date for Zarathustra's life), while it is believed that "Younger *Avesta"* was first comprised around 800 BCE (Boyce 1990, xiii).

As mentioned above, it was during the Sasanian period when the disparate texts were finally compiled into writing to form the definitive *Avesta*. It is believed that the early Sasanian kings had chroniclers put all of the known oral texts into writing, combined with the few that had been written to complete the book (Malandra 1983, 30). A high-priest and Ardashir I's advisor, Tansar, is believed to have authorized which texts were admitted to the final version and which ones were omitted (Boyce 2001, 103).

The final version of the *Avesta* was unlike most other previous religious texts of the ancient Near East. Near Eastern religious texts prior to the Sasanians focused either on ritual or morality, but the *Avesta* wove the two

elements together in a seamless way. Most of the religions of the ancient Near East before Christianity and Manicheism were highly ritualistic, often commenting very little on issues of morality in their texts. Although much of the *Avesta* is concerned with ritualistic aspects surrounding purity, there are numerous references in the Vendidad concerning how a follower should lead a moral life. One passage states:

> "Creator! With how much does the contract when broken affect which is committed by the joining hands?
>
> Then answered Ahura-Mazda: With six hundred similar punishments which it brings upon the nearest relations…
>
> Creator! If a man strikes a hard sore on a man,
>
> What is the punishment for it?
>
> Then answered Ahura-Mazda: Strike thirty strokes with the horse-goad, thirty with the Craosho-charna." (Bleeck 2005, I, 33-35).

The passage highlights that in Zoroastrianism, like most religions, violence against others was condemned, but the passage also highlights the importance of contracts, known as *mithras*. Contracts were very important in Zoroastrianism, so much that there was a god of contracts, Mithra, who even became popular among Roman soldiers.

The importance of contracts is a reflection of the Sasanian/Zoroastrian beliefs in dualism and the eternal struggle of the truth or *asha* against the lie or *drugh* (Malandra 1983, 47). Essentially, the morality of Zoroastrianism was primarily concerned with observing the purity laws and fighting the evil devs (Boyce 1990, 2), thereby keeping proper balance in the universe. One of the Yashts from the "younger" *Avesta* summarizes how the lie can affect purity in the world:

> "How does one separate one's self from the path of the pure, how from that of the wicked? Then answered Ahura-Mazda: if he utters my Manthra, keeps in mind reciting, draws a circle uttering, guards his own body.

> I will for thee: every Druga which runs about openly, every one which is concealed, every one which pollutes—for thee every Druga, for the Aryan land will I smite away, for thee will I bind the Druga with cords [?] I will curse away the Drugas.
>
> I will say to the pure man, he shall draw three circles, right, round circles shall he draw, round will I say to the pure man, nine circle shall he draw, nine say I to the pure man." (Bleeck 2005, III, 31).

Thus, the one who knows the true path of Ahura Mazda will be protected by the god from the lie through numerous circles, but bringing these circles of power to reality involved more than just a belief - Sasanian Zoroastrianism posited that in order for a moral person to fight the devs, he must perform the proper rituals along in addition to having a pure heart.

Having a good heart and mind was only part of the Sasanians' war against evil. They also believed that to be a good Zoroastrian, one must follow the proper rituals, which could be as simple as a prayer, as Zarathustra was told by Ahura Mazda:

> "Zarathustra asked Ahura-Mazda: Ahura-Mazda, Heavenly, Holiest, Creator of the corporeal world, Pure One!
>
> How shall I purify the dwelling?
>
> How shall I purify the fire, how the water, how the earth, how the cattle, how the trees, how the pure man, how the pure woman, how the stars, how the moon, how the sun, how the lights without beginning, how all the good things which Ahura-Mazda has created, which have a pure origin?
>
> Then answered Ahura-Mazda: Thou shalt pronounce the prayer of purification O Zarathustra.
>
> Then will these dwellings be pure." (Bleeck 2005, I, 95).

To the Sasanians, the most important religious ritual they performed was the creation and care of sacred fires they believed to be the earthly avatar of

Ahura Mazda.

Although it is well-known that the Zoroastrian sacred fires are the earthly representation of Ahura Mazda, it is not known when the first ones were established. John of Nikiu mentioned the Zoroastrian fires in a passage of his history, but again, it is anachronistic and wrong on many points. He wrote, "And as Perseus was surprised at what had befallen, forthwith from that fire he kindled a fire and preserved it. And this fire he took and brought to Persia on his return and placed it in the kingdom of Assyria. And the Persians made it a god and honoured [sic] it and built it a temple and named it 'The immortal fire.' And they say that fire is a son of the Sun enveloped in crystal." (Charles 2007, 23).

John of Nikiu was correct in his statement that the Persians worshipped the sacred fires and associated their god with the sun. Another non-Persian chronicler, the 6th century Byzantine historian Procopius, also noted as much. In a passage where he described the surrender of a city by a Sasanian general named Perozes who served under Sasanian King Kavad I (488-496; 499-531), the general first consulted Zoroastrians priests, known as the magi, in order to comply with Persian theological beliefs. Procopius explained, "Perozes should consent to prostrate himself before him as having proved himself master, and, taking the oaths traditional among the Persians, should give pledges that they would never again take the field against the nation of the Ephthalitae. When Perozes heard this, he held a consultation with the Magi who were present and enquired of them whether he must comply with the terms dictated by the enemy. The Magi replied that, as to the oath, he should settle the matter according to his own pleasure; as for the rest, however, he should circumvent his enemy by craft. And they reminded him that it was the custom among the Persians to prostrate themselves before the rising sun each day; he should therefore, watch the time closely and meet the leader of the Ephthalitae at dawn, and…turning toward the rising sun, make his obeisance." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, iii, 18-21).

Procopius also wrote about how Sasanian King Khosrow I (Chosroes) revered the regnal fire in Persia, and he made a connection between the Sasanians and ancient Romans. "Now it happened that Chosroes had come from Assyria to a place toward the north called Adarbiganon, from which he

was planning to make an invasion into the Roman domain through Persarmenia. In that place is the great sanctuary of fire, which the Persians reverence above all other gods. There the fire is guarded unquenched by the Magi, and they perform carefully a great number of sacred rites, and in particular they consult an oracle on those matters which are of the greatest of importance. This is the fire which the Romans worshipped under the name of Hestia in ancient times." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II, XXIV, 1-3).

John of Nikiu and Procopius knew about the Sasanian sacred fires because they were so important to the dynasty. With that said, while Procopius understood the significance of the sacred fires more than John, neither historian understood their true theological significance. All Persian dynasties built special temples for the sacred fires, but the Sasanians appear to have had more of a special reverence for them than their predecessors did. For instance, the fire temples built by the Achaemenids and Parthians often also held cult statues and icons of various gods. Early in the Sasanian Dynasty, the high-priests removed the icons and statues and replaced them with sacred fires (Boyce 2001, 107).

The Sasanians also systematically made the establishment of sacred fires more uniform. Private individuals, no matter how pious, were not allowed to establish fires. Moreover, only one regnal fire was allowed to burn at a time, but several smaller fires were established under official sanction (Boyce 2001, 108), and the role of establishing official fires was under the purview of the Zoroastrian high-priest or herbad. Although few sources remain that detail these responsibilities, one inscription of Kirdir's relates that the program was actually quite extensive and extended beyond the borders of Persia. During Shapur I's western campaigns, the Sasanians observed sacred fires in the Caucasus region, and there were claims that sacred fires burned as far away as Albania in Europe.

Modern scholars believe that many of the sacred fires outside of Persia were initially established by the Achaemenids (Boyce 2001, 110), but regardless, Kirdir made sure the far-flung sacred fires were cared for under his watch. The high-priest wrote, "And I caused many fires and priestly colleges to flourish in Iran, and also in non-Iranian lands. There were fires and priests in the non-Iranian lands which were reached by the army of the

King of kings. The provincial capital Antioch and the province of Syria, and the districts dependent on Syria; the provincial capital Tarsus and the province of Cilicia, and the districts dependent on Cilicia; the provincial capital Caesarea Pontus, and the province of Armenia, and Georgia and Albania and Balasagan, up to the 'Gate of the Alans'—these were plundered and burnt and laid waste by Shabur, King of kings, with his armies. There too, at the command of the King of kings, I reduced to order the priests and fires which were in those lands. And I did not allow [harm] be done them, or captives made. And whoever had thus been made captive, him indeed I took and sent back to his own land." (Boyce 1990, 113).

Whether the fires were first established by the Achaemenids or the Sasanians (as Kirdir had claimed) is less important than the fact there were some so far from Persia. The sacred fires clearly were a powerful force to the believers of Zoroastrianism, especially the Sasanians, who tried their best to appear as pious followers of the faith.

As important as the sacred fires were to the Sasanians, their funerary practices played just as a significant role in their religion in many ways. Zoroastrian funerary practices were like none other at the time or since, for that matter. The belief in purity reinforced in so many verses in the *Avesta* greatly influenced how the Sasanians disposed of their dead. According to Zoroastrian religion, corpses were considered to be among the most unclean of all things, so special precautions had to be made when disposing of them (Boyce 2001, 44). Zoroastrianism held that once a person was deceased, the soul needed to leave immediately, and the only way to do that was to expose the corpse to dogs, vultures, and other animals.

The Sasanian era Vendidad is very specific as to how a corpse is polluted and how much time should pass before it should be disposed of:

> "Zarathustra asked Ahura-Mazda: Ahura-Mazda, the Heavenly, the Holy, Creator of the corporeal world. Pure One!
>
> When does the Drukhs Nacus rush to the dead men?
>
> Then answered Ahura-Mazda: immediately after death, O holy Zarathustra! Consciousness departs.

> The Drukhs Nacus rushes hither from the region of the North, in the form of a fly, pernicious when she comes bringing immense filth from her anus, as (do) the most hideous of the Khrafetras.
>
> Creator! When these [corspes] have been slain by dogs, wolves, sorcerers, by wounds, by falls, by men, by violence, by anguish, after how long a time does Drukhs Nacus arrive?
>
> Then answered Ahura-Mazda: After the next division of the day." (Bleeck 2005, I, 57).

After the ritual was complete, the deceased's bones were collected and placed in an ossuary. The prohibition on touching dead corpses is clearly stated in the Vendidad. One verse states:

> "No corpse which has been carried away by dogs, birds, wolves, winds, or flies, defiles a man.
>
> Were these corpses which have been carried away by dogs, birds, wolves, winds, or flies, to defile men,
>
> Then would almost all my corporeal world be little allied to purity." (Bleeck 2005, I, 40).

Unfortunately, Sasanian and Avestan texts only reference the ritual from a Zoroastrian perspective, so many details about the process are lacking. Again, to understand the process a bit better, one must turn to non-Sasanian sources, only a few of which mention the practice of exposure. For example, Procopius mentioned an instance, and the 5th century BCE Greek historian Herodotus wrote about the ritual during the Achaemenid period. Herodotus's passage was fairly detailed and informative: "There is another practice, however, concerning the burial of the dead, which is not spoken of openly and is something of a mystery; it is that a male Persian is never buried until the body has been torn by a bird or a dog. I know for certain that the Magi have this custom, for they are quite open about it. The Persians in general, however, cover a body with wax and then bury it. The Magi are a peculiar caste." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, I, 140).

The practice that Herodotus mentions of covering the body with wax was

reserved for the Achaemenid kings, who were interred in tombs. In their quest to appear legitimate and connected to the Achaemenids, the Sasanians also embalmed their dead kings in tombs while the rest of their people practiced corpse exposure (Boyce 2001, 120-1).

The passage in which Procopius mentions the ritual of exposure concerned a Sasanian general under Kavad I named Seoses, who had been sentenced to death for straying from Zoroastrianism. “Now the whole Persian council gathered to sit in judgement moved more by envy than by respect for the law. For they were thoroughly hostile to his office, which was unfamiliar to them, and also were embittered by the natural temper of the man. For while Seoses was a man quite impossible to bribe, and a most exact respecter of justice, he was afflicted with a degree of arrogance not to be compared with that of any other. This quality, indeed, seems to be inbred in the Persian officials, but in Seoses even they thought that the malady had developed to an altogether extraordinary degree. So his accusers said all those things which have been indicated above, and added to this that the man was by no means willing to live in the established fashion or to uphold the institutions of the Persians. For he both reverenced strange divinities, and lately, when his wife had died, he had buried her, though it was forbidden by the laws of the Persians ever to hide in the earth the bodies of the dead. The judges therefore condemned the man to death.” (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, xi, 32-36).

Other Aspects of Sasanian Culture

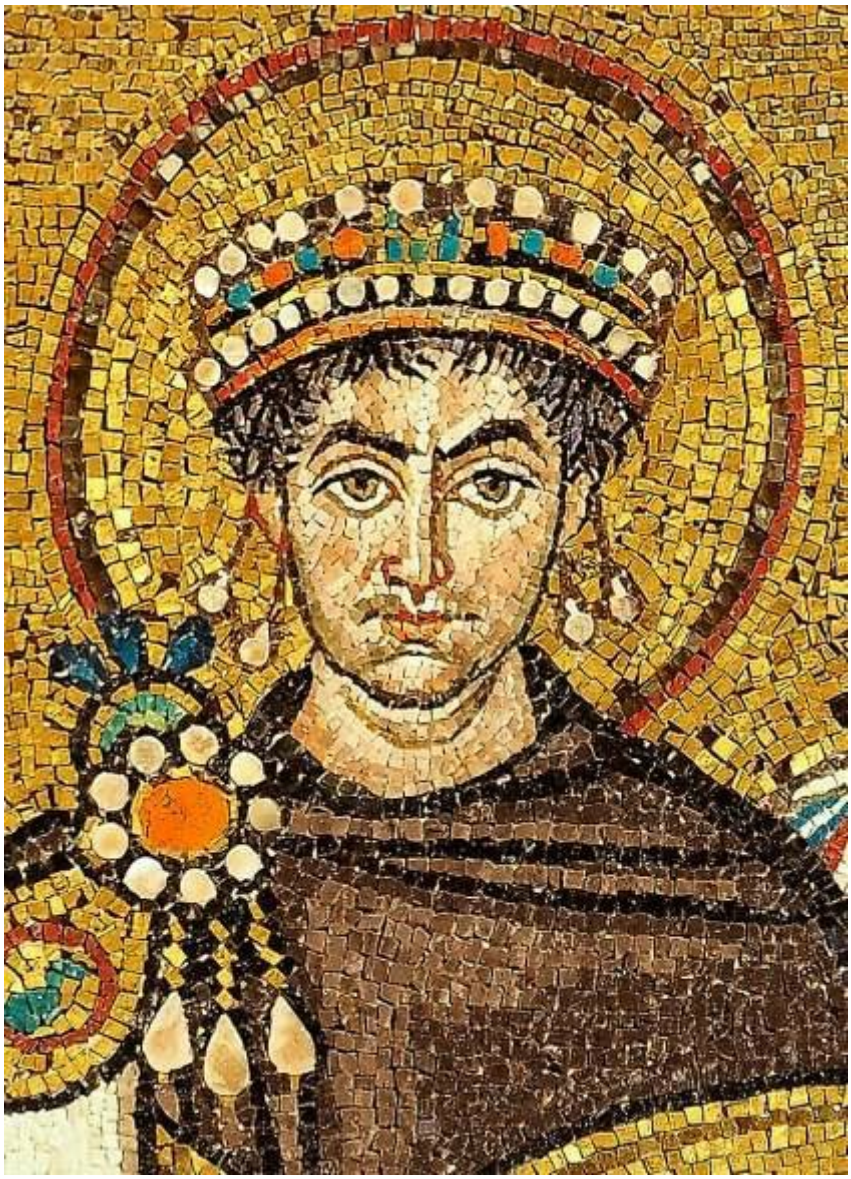
Zoroastrianism clearly played a major role in the culture of Sasanian Persia, if not the most important role, as it influenced everything from their laws to their daily life activities. With that said, Zoroastrianism was not the only aspect of Sasanian culture.

One thing nearly all pre-modern cultures have in common is the importance of the priest class in the collection and dissemination of knowledge. Priests served as the leaders of their peoples’ faiths, but they were also often scientists, philosophers, and doctors, and the libraries serving as receptacles of religious texts doubled as storage units of historical and scientific knowledge. In this respect, the Zoroastrian priests of Sasanian Persia were no different than those of the other cultures who came before them.

Since Persia is located at the crossroads where East meets West, and it was along the Silk Road, Zoroastrian priests in the Sasanian era were able to collect ideas from as far west as Greece and Rome and as far east as India (Boyce 2001, 113). A late Sasanian text claims that the collection of non-religious academic texts began during the reign of Shapur I. “Shabur, King of kings, son of Ardashir, further collected the non-religious writings on medicine, astronomy, movement, time, space, substance, accident, becoming, decay, transformation, logic and other crafts and skills which were dispersed throughout India, Byzantium and other lands, and collated them with the Avesta, and commanded that a copy should be made of all those writings which were flawless, to be deposited in the Royal Treasury.” (Boyce 1990, 114).

The above text and most others that relate to Sasanian academic pursuits come from the reign of Khosrow I (501-579), who took a special interest in learning. Khosrow I also took advantage of changes in the Roman Empire. When the last Roman emperor in the West was deposed in 476, Europe was thrust into a period of chaos generally referred to as the Dark Ages. Germanic warlords fought for control of the West, while power in the East was transferred to Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire, whose kings continued to refer to themselves as Roman emperors.

When Justinian the Great (527-565) came to the throne, he wielded power in a way that had not been seen in Rome for hundreds of years. As part of his efforts to make Constantinople the “second Rome,” he closed down the philosophical school in Athens with the hope that the great thinkers would come to Constantinople. Some of those scholars did, in fact, move to Constantinople, but others were enticed by Khosrow I to come to Persia and add to the growing corpus of knowledge he had acquired (Brosius 2010, 172).



Petar Milosevic's picture of a contemporary mosaic depicting Justinian the Great

Just as the Sasanian kings brought in philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals from a number of different places throughout the ancient world, their subjects were just as diverse. The Sasanians themselves were Persians, but their kingdom extended far beyond Persia and included Arabs, Armenians, Turks, and a number of other Asiatic peoples. In this sense, the Sasanians carried on another tradition established by the Achaemenids by ruling over a vast territory with a diverse number of subject peoples. The Sasanians' recognition of the diversity of their empire is reflected in the

multilingual inscriptions they left at the Ka'aba Zardusht and the tolerance they generally showed for other religions, with a few exceptions mentioned earlier. With that said, the Parthian language was gradually limited until during the middle of the 4th century, when its written use was probably outlawed (Boyce 2001, 116). It is unknown why the Sasanians outlawed the written use of their predecessors' language, but it might have been due to the fact that the *Avesta* had finally been compiled during the Sasanian Dynasty, which meant their language would be the cultural winner.

Although not as important as their religion, trade played an important role in Sasanian culture. The Sasanians inherited the Silk Road from the Parthians and were therefore able to continue to profit from it, outside of a few minor disturbances by nomadic bands from the north and east. But unlike the Parthians, the Sasanians conducted trade in other methods besides overland routes. Archaeological and textual evidence shows that the Sasanians developed long-range trade routes stretching from India to Sasanian possessions in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the country now known as Yemen (Brosius 2010, 182). Sasanian trade routes impressed the Byzantine Greeks, as noted by Procopius, who wrote, "For it was impossible to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbours [sic] where the Indian ships first put in, [since they inhabit the adjoining country], and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes; and it seemed to the Homeritae a difficult thing to cross a country which was a desert and which extended so far that a long time was required for the journey across it, and then to go against a people much more warlike than themselves. Later on Abramus too, when at length he had established his power most securely, promised the Emperor Justinian many times to invade the land of Persia, but only once began the journey and then straightaway turned back." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, XX).

As the passage relates, the Sasanians faced Justinian in during the 6th century, and he proved to be the most formidable foe the Sasanians had confronted since Diocletian.

Later Sasanian History

The conflict between the Sasanians and Romans ebbed after the middle of the 4th century for a number of reasons. The Sasanians had more pressing

problems with the emergence of Asiatic tribes to their north and east, while the Romans were in the midst of fighting off primarily Germanic tribes on their northern border. The Romans ultimately lost the fight, and the base of power gradually moved to Constantinople after Constantine's reign.

During the reign of Kavad I, in about 506, the Sasanians entered into another short-term peace treaty with the Byzantine Empire. Apparently, this treaty was not the result of the Sasanians being defeated by the Byzantines in any battle, but more of a move to protect their flank. Nomadic Asiatic tribes, which Procopius referred to generally as "Huns," continued to create problems for the Sasanians, so Kavad I called for the treaty after giving back the city of Amida to the Byzantines. Procopius explained, "Because they had shewn themselves wanting in obedience to them, when it was possible to capture as prisoners of war such a multitude of Persians and the son of Glones and the city itself, while they had in consequence attached to themselves signal disgrace by carrying Roman money to the enemy, and had taken Amida from the Persians by purchasing it with silver. After this the Persians, since their war with the Huns kept dragging on, entered into a treaty with the Romans, which was arranged by them for seven years, and was made by the Roman Celer and the Persian Aspebedes; both armies then retired homeward and remained at peace." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, ix, 23-24).

Once the Sasanians had vanquished their nomadic enemies and Constantinople had established itself as the new power in the Mediterranean, their peace treaty would not last. Eventually, the two powers would engage in a series of wars that would prove more destructive than the prior ones, even as they did not prove any more decisive.

Justinian the Great's Sasanian counterpart was Khosrow I Anoshirvan (531-579), who proved to be just as ambitious as the Byzantine emperor. After reorganizing the military and establishing internal peace in Persia, Khosrow I turned his attention to reacquiring lost possessions in Mesopotamia and Armenia.

Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.'s picture of a coin depicting Khosrow I

The renewed conflict between Persia and the Byzantines began the same year Khosrow I came to power and continued into the first few years of the reign of his successor, Hormizd IV (579-590) (Frendo 2008, 223). The first major battle took place in 531 along the banks of the Euphrates River, where the Sasanians advanced with their full army into the region but were repulsed by the Byzantine forces. Procopius described the fight: "Finally the Persians made their bivouac on the bank of the Euphrates just opposite the city of Callinicus, From there they were about to march through a country absolutely uninhabited by man, and thus to quit the land of the Romans; for they purposed no longer to proceed as before, keeping to the bank of the river. The Romans had passed the night in the city of Sura, and, removing from there, they came upon the enemy just in the act of preparing for the departure. Now the fest of Easter was near and would take place on the following day…He then formed the phalanx with a single front, disposing his men as follows: on the left wing by the river he stationed all the infantry, while on the right where the ground rose sharply he placed Arethas and all his Saracens; he himself with the cavalry took his position in the centre. Thus the Romans arrayed themselves…Then by mutual agreement all the best of the Persian army advanced to attack the Roman right wing, where Arethas and the Saracens had been stationed. But they broke their formation and moved apart, so that they got the reputation of having betrayed the Romans to the Persians. For without awaiting the oncoming enemy they all straightway beat a hasty

retreat. So the Persians in this way broke through the enemy's line and immediately got in the rear of the Roman cavalry…Many a time after giving up, the Persians would advance against them determined to break up and destroy their line, but they always retired again from the assault unsuccessful. For their horses, annoyed by the clashing of the shields, reared up and made confusion for themselves and their riders. Thus both sides continued the struggle until it had become late in the day. And when night had already come on, the Persian withdrew to their camp, and Belisarius accompanied by some few men found a freight-boat and crossed over to the island in the river, while the other Romans reached the same place by swimming. On the following day many freight-boats were brought to the Romans from the city of Callinicus and they were conveyed thither in them, and the Persians, after despoiling the dead, all departed homeward. However they did not find their own dead less numerous than the enemy's." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, xviiii, 13-50).

Khosrow I's defeat in Mesopotamia was only temporary, though, as the Sasanian king proved to be extremely resilient. 9 years after his major defeat in Mesopotamia, Khosrow I led his army back into the Fertile Crescent, but instead of attacking Byzantine positions in Mesopotamia, he went for the Levant. Khosrow I's target was the ancient city of Antioch, which held strategic and symbolic significance as a wealthy city and a center of trade. It was also an early Christian ecclesiastical center, which was not lost on Khosrow I, and it was known in the Byzantine annals as "Chosroes." Procopius wrote, "Not long after this the Persian army also came. There they all pitched their tents and made camp fronting on the River Orontes and not very far from the stream. Chosroes then sent Paulus up beside the fortifications and demanded money from the men of Antioch, saying that for ten centenaria of gold he would depart from there, and it was obvious that he would accept even less than this for his withdrawal…But on the morrow the populace of Antioch [for they are not seriously disposed, but are always engaged in jesting and disorderly performance] heaped insults upon Chosroes from the battlements and taunted him with unseemly laughter…On the following day, accordingly, he led up all the Persians against the wall and commanded a portion of the army to make assaults at different points along the river, and he himself with the most of the men and best troops directed an

attack against the height…But the Persians, with no one opposing them, set ladders against the wall and mounted with no difficulty…For the Persians did not spare persons of any age and were slaying all whom they met, old and young alike…Thus the inhabitants of Antioch were visited with every form of misfortune." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II, viii).

Once he'd laid waste to Antioch, Khosrow I moved his army south, towards Jerusalem. According to Procopius, Khosrow I's real target was Jerusalem, but since it was so far into Byzantine territory, he had to take other strategic points first. During the 6th century, Jerusalem was safely within Byzantine territory, and Justinian made it his personal duty to protect the city from the infidels, which added another religious dimension to the already religiously charged conflict between the Sasanian Empire and the Byzantine Empire. Procopius noted, "And his purpose was to lead the army straight for Palestine, in order that he might plunder all their treasures and especially those in Jerusalem. For he had it from hearsay that this was an especially goodly land and peopled by wealthy inhabitants. And all the Romans, both officers and soldiers, were far from entertaining any thought of confronting the enemy or of standing in the way of their passage, but manning their strongholds as each one could, they thought it sufficient to preserve them and save themselves." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II, xx, 18-19).

Khosrow I was stopped by Justinian's forces before he was able to make it to Jerusalem, so the conflict moved to the kingdom of Lazika in the north, on the southern slope of the Caucasus Mountains, roughly congruent with the modern nation-state of Georgia. The Sasanian forces arrived in the region but were surprised by and routed by the Byzantine forces. According to Procopius, "Now the five thousand, upon coming nearer to the frontier of Lazica, encamped in a body beside the small bands and plundered the neighbouring [sic] country…And the Persians chose out a thousand men of repute among them and sent them forth, that no one might advance against the camp to harm it…The Romans, therefore, and the Lazi fell suddenly upon the thousand men, and not one of them succeeded in escaping, but the most of them were slain, while some also were captured…And the Romans and Lazi captured the camp and all the standards, and they also secured many weapons and a great deal of money as plunder, besides great numbers of horses and mules." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II, xxx).

Although Khosrow I was a very active military king, his campaigns were mostly ineffective, and the Sasanians did not gain or lose any significant territory during his reign. However, when Khorsow I was not fighting, he initiated a number of programs that helped make the kingdom stronger. Besides warfare, trade was a very important aspect of Khosrow I's rule. The king continued to profit from the Silk Road running through Sasanian territory, and he was the one who conquered Yemen and established a sea route from that land to India (Brosius 2010, 154-5). Khosrow I was also instrumental in remodeling the Sasanian army. The army was still largely dependent on its cavalry troops, but the king decided to decentralize the army by dividing it into quarters, with a commander for each cardinal direction of the empire (Brosius 2010, 155). The division of the Sasanian army into quarters was probably based on tradition as much as practicality; following in the footsteps of their Near Eastern predecessors, the Sasanian kings referred to themselves as the rulers of the four corners of the universe.

Khosrow I was truly a warrior king, but the primary sources also indicate he was as pious as any other Sasanian king. It was during Khorsow I's reign that the definitive canon of the *Avesta* had been compiled. It was also during his rule that the Avestan alphabet was created, and though it was only a liturgical language, it made it easier to modify and control from the top of the power hierarchy. During Khorsow I's reign, a standardized 46 letter Avestan alphabet was created for use by the priests (Boyce 2001, 134).

An Avestan text attributed to Khosrow I, which only survived as a later Arabic version, relates how the king personally viewed the Zoroastrian concepts of truth and purity. It states, "I give thanks unto God…for all the favours [sic] which he has shown me…Many benefits require in return a deep sense of obligation…And since I hold that gratitude should express itself in both word and deed, I have sought the course of action most pleasing to God, and have found that it consists in that whereby sky and earth continue to exist, the mountains remain immovable, the rivers flow, and the earth is kept pure: that is to say, in equity and justice." (Boyce 1990, 115).

Khosrow I's piousness was duplicated by the last few Sasanian kings, although none were as important as him. After his reign, the Sasanians once more fell into violence at the hands of the nobles. Kings were chosen by the

nobles and murdered if they did not do as the nobles pleased. In fact, this process began before Khosrow I's reign ended, and it appears likely there was an attempt made on his life. Procopius wrote a detailed passage about the assassination attempt and the reasons behind it: "Straightway it came about that plots were formed against both rulers by their subjects; and I shall now explain how this happened. Chosroes, the son of Cabades, was a man of an unruly turn of mind and strangely fond of innovations. For this reason he himself was always full of excitement and alarms, and he was an unfailing cause of similar feelings in others. All, therefore, who were men of action among the Persians, in vexation at his administration, were purposing to establish over themselves another king form the house of Cabades. And since they longed earnestly for the rule of Zames, which was made impossible by the law by reason of the disfigurement of his eye, as has been stated, they found upon consideration that the best course for them was to establish in power his child Cabades, who bored the same name as his grandfather, while Zames, as guardian of the child, should administer the affairs of the Persians as he wished…But the plan was discovered and came to the knowledge of the king, and thus their proceedings were stopped. For Chosroes slew Zames himself and all his own brothers and those of Zames together with all their male offspring, and also all the Persian notable who had either begun or taken part in any way in the plot against him. Among these was Aspebedes, the brother of Chosroes' mother." (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, I, xxii, 1-6).

Khosrow I would have the last laugh, as he outlived all of his enemies and was able to pass the kingship on to his son, Hormizd IV (579-590). However, Hormizd IV did not rule as long as his father and left little impact on the history of the Sasanian Empire. Most of his activities were focused on continuing domestic reforms and further establishing the theology of Zoroastrianism. It was during Hormizd IV's rule that religious communal violence, especially toward Christians, appears to have reached a crescendo. The violence was apparently so bad that it threatened the stability of the dynasty itself, so much so that Hormizd IV felt compelled to do something about it. In a letter to the Zoroastrian priesthood, also known as "magi," Hormizd IV exhorted the religious leaders to put a lid on communal violence. Perhaps the king saw that centuries of war with Rome and the Byzantines did little for his kingdom. The king also indicated that by refraining from

violence against Christians. they could possibly win more converts. His letter states, “Even as our royal throne cannot stand upon its two front legs without the back ones, so also our government cannot stand and be secure if we incense the Christians and the adherents of other religions, who are not of our faith. Cease, therefore, to harass the Christians, but exert yourselves diligently in doing good works, so that the Christians and the adherents of other religions, seeing that, may praise you for it, and feel themselves drawn to our religion.” (Boyce 1990, 115).

It is interesting that Hormizd IV makes a reference to potential proselytization, even though Zoroastrianism was never a faith of missionaries. It seems that the king’s request was more practical than anything; perhaps he knew that another round of war with the Byzantine Empire might deplete the royal coffers, or maybe he believed that Christianity would soon become the ascendant religion in the region.

Little did Hormizd IV know that it would not be the Christians who would threaten to annihilate his religion. Instead, a little-known sect that was forming hundreds of miles away in the deserts of Arabia.

The rise of Islam happened to coincide with the rule of the last great Sasanian king, Khosrow II (590-628). As a conqueror, Khosrow II did far more than Khosrow I and was more like Shapur I. Khosrow II sacked Jerusalem in 614 and conquered Egypt in 619, accomplishing what Khosrow I had been unable to do, but before Khosrow was able to carry out his successful conquests, he needed to deal with problems at home (Frendo 2008, 226). During the first year of Khosrow II’s rule, another claimant, named Bahram VI Chubin, claimed the Sasanian throne. Although Bahram VI had the support of the king-making Sasanian nobles, Khosrow II proved to be more politically astute by currying favor with the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (582-602). Khosrow II defeated Bahram VI in battle (Brosius 2010, 157) and went on to enjoy nearly 10 years of peace with the Byzantine Empire.

It was not until Maurice had been assassinated that Khosrow II conducted his campaign against Byzantine possessions in the Near East. The end result of the Byzantine-Sasanian wars during Khosrow II’s rule was much like what had taken place during the previous kings’ reigns. But while this stalemate

might not have changed the geopolitical situation in the past, an Islamic empire was on the move and looking for new land and converts.

The last Sasanian king was Yazdgird III (633-651), who was the unfortunate recipient of his predecessors' myopia in regards to Islam. As much as Khosrow II may be seen as the last great Sasanian king and conqueror, he did nothing to prepare his kingdom for the Arab onslaught. The Arab Muslim army took Babylon in 636, which set the stage for the epic battle between the Persians and Arabs at al-Qadisiya that same year. The battle was an overwhelming victory for the Arabs, who continued on to Persia and defeated the Sasanians once more at Nihavand in 642 (Brosius 2010, 159).

At that point, the Sasanians were leaderless, but they continued to resist the Arabs for a time. A 9th century Arabic manuscript detailed some of the problems the Arabs faced when they attempted to occupy Sasanian Persia: "Hudhaifah advanced as far as Ardabil, the capital of Adharbaijan, in which city was the marzban [i.e., Persian governor] thereof, and where the payment of its tax was made. The marzban had gathered there the militia…These resisted the Moslems [sic] fiercely for some days. Then the marzban made terms with Hudhaifah for all the people of Aharbaijan for 800,000 dirhams, the conditions being that he should not kill or enslave any of them, nor raze any fire temples…nor hinder the people of ash-Shiz in their peculiar custom of dancing on their festal days nor in observing their usual observances… When he arrived at Ardabil he found its people in possession of a treaty, but some of them had broken it, so he raided them, defeating and plundering them…The Ali ibn-abu-Talib appointed al-Ash'ath governor Adharbaijan… He established in Ardabil a number of Arabs who were enrolled in the pension lists and the register, and made it a capital city, and built its mosque." (Boyce 1990, 115-6).

Once in total control of Persia, the Arabs were able to wipe the Sasanian Dynasty out and establish *sharia* law across the land. With that, Zoroastrianism suffered a quick demise in its homeland.

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